

GIN AND LILIES

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by

DELIA BROWN



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CHAPTER ONE

I NEVER wanted to go to that houseparty and nor would I have gone if it hadn't been that Ambrose wanted to see Brogan's collection of stamps, and Brogan wanted Ambrose's opinion on a Tintoretto he had bought and over which he thought he had been swindled. With Ambrose, of course, any stamp collection was a temptation not to be resisted, and the fee for his opinion about the painting not to be lightly disregarded.

"You needn't come if you don't want to!" Ambrose said.

But he always says that and hates it if I then take him at his word and stay away. Chiefly because he's got used to me being around, and keeping his notes typed for him and listening to him while he thinks aloud. I've done it ever since I was fourteen and he was twenty-two, and used to come down and stay with my father and talk about stamps. I suppose it's something that can't be helped. I only learnt to type and about stamps and pictures and that sort of thing simply in order to be able to act as a kind of honorary secretary to him. He takes me for granted and seems to think I'm still about fourteen, whereas in reality I'm nineteen, nearly twenty. He doesn't live far away from us, in Chelsea and we live in Kensington. So it's quite easy for me to go round every day and collate notes for his book on Leonardo da Vinci, and then type out the manuscript. I like doing it and my father says I may possibly pick up some real education that way, which is more than I ever did at school.

Ambrose takes it completely for granted, but then he takes most things for granted. That was how it happened that I began to go with him when he went to stay with people who wanted their collections valued or arranged, or wanted his opinion of something they were doubtful about. "I'll bring young Delia," he would say to them. "She keeps things tidy for me." They never object, partly because he has a flair for anything genuine, and partly because he has a way of getting his own way. Not that he's at all forceful. He's rather diffident really, with fair hair and a mild look, but somehow or other you don't feel much like arguing with him.

Anyway he rang me up and said, "Pack a suitcase, ducky, and put in your most exiguous evening frock, and your gayest day wear. We're going down to Grogan's to see if he's been taken for a ride over a Tintoretto."

Well, no one in their sane senses would want to go and stay in Grogan's house that I can see. He's disgustingly rich and perfectly hideous and collects the most awful crowd of hangers-on you've ever seen. I said so to Ambrose, but he only laughed and said, "We don't have to talk to his guests—much. And that stamp collection of his is fabulous. It's only from Friday evening till Monday morning anyway. Besides, what about this novel you're always threatening to write? Copy, Delia, copy! No self-respecting author would miss the chance of seeing life in the raw at Grogan's."

All the same I didn't want to go. I had a feeling about it. Psychic if you see what I mean. My father says that's all nonsense even if my grandmother was from the Highlands and known to be 'fey'. But he's only being obstinate. Everyone in the family knows that Grandmother foretold all the deaths in her family, and her own as well. And if ever I go against my feelings, it's always fatal. Uneasy

feelings, I mean. Naturally nobody ever goes against happy feelings.

I wasn't sure what exiguous meant, so I looked it up in the dictionary and discovered I didn't have that sort of frock, so I packed the next best, the pale blue one with no top to it and the scarlet velvet ribbon round the waist. And I took some petunia coloured linen slacks, and a bathing suit, because it was well known from the picture papers that Grogan had the most magnificent swimming pool in England, and it was blazing hot even for June. I took some other things as well, but those were the high spots.

Ambrose turned up to collect me about three o'clock on the Friday afternoon wearing what he called his palm beach suit and dark glasses and a floppy sort of linen hat, like little boys wear at prep schools when they play cricket sometimes. He looked ridiculous, but it's never the least use telling him so. He merely looks pleased as if you'd paid him a compliment. But he's disgustingly critical about other people and he looked at my sandals and my pale green frock, and then at the green linen turban that had taken me hours to get right, and said, "You can't come out on a summer afternoon in a thing like that. You look like something from the boulevards, but not the right sort of thing. For heaven's sake get that perfectly reasonable straw hat you wore the other day."

Then he switched off the engine and settled himself back to wait for me to go and get that hat. I can't think why one doesn't refuse, but if one did then he just wouldn't pay any attention, he wouldn't start the car or anything; or else he'd just go off and leave you behind.

"I think your hat is awful," I said.

"Isn't it?" he agreed amiably. "But it's so comfortable. Hurry up, my little duck, we've got ninety miles to do."

Of course, I'm trained to it really. My father behaves in very much the same way.

The straw hat is really very pretty, but I did feel that the turban made me look more sophisticated, and far more equipped to meet all the semi-demi monde that Grogan collected round him. Frankly I was a bit uncertain about meeting those sort of people. I hadn't an idea how to cope with them and I was sure they'd think me rather a dreary little frump from Kensington and either ignore me or patronise me. But it wasn't any use confiding that to Ambrose. He'd think it quite absurd. He never bothers his head about what other people think or do, and doesn't see why anyone else should.

So I went back and took off the turban and got the hat, and when I returned, he switched on the engine, grinned at me the way he always does when I've done what he wanted and said, "There's a pretty girl."

And as we drove off he said thoughtfully, "I've a hunch this painting is a fake, and if it is, then there'll be a fine old to-do. Grogan will go out looking for blood."

"Whose blood?" I asked with interest.

Ambrose shook his head. "That's just what I don't know," he said. "He didn't buy it through a dealer, but through a pal. Some pal! But the point is that Grogan is as vain as they come, and it's his proud boast that no one can palm off anything on him in the old master line. I just gather from what he said on the telephone that this time he thinks he's been had."

"Well you'll be able to tell him pretty quickly," I said hopefully. "And then we can get away. I somehow don't like this party."

"We're there till Monday morning," said Ambrose. "I gather that Grogan doesn't want me to appear as the expert.

I'm just down as a guest. So far as anyone knows I shan't even be shown the canvas. Publicly I'm an ardent stamp fan."

"Oh," I said and settled down to make the best of it. After all it was the most heavenly June weather, and Ambrose drives like an angel, and I had a certain amount of faith in my pale blue evening frock. It was quite a morale booster.

The Grogan Mansion was even more amazing than I had expected. It was simply enormous. It had about a hundred rooms, I should think. And although chiefly Georgian, various owners had tacked on bits and pieces to amuse themselves. Someone had gone all Gothic in one wing. It had a kind of macabre magnificence and you drove up to it through an avenue of the most lovely oak trees I had ever seen. We got there in the evening, about half-past six and there was that heavenly country hush, and the sky was a soft deep blue, like blue glaze. The house itself was grey against the blue, and in front of it, at the bottom of a gentle slope of grass, an enormous ornamental artificial lake reflected the gentle sky.

Far away to the left on a small rise was a gazebo and more trees, and everywhere the smoothest, most shaven turf in the world. I remember thinking, 'Whatever he's done to the interior of the house, at least he's not been a vandal outside.' Just as Ambrose stopped his small Standard outside the front door, which was as large as a barn, a big Jaguar swung smoothly round the west wing and accelerating seemed to spin by us. I had just a glimpse of a girl driving. She wore a turban, only hers was black, and beneath it her face was quite white. I just registered that and she was gone.

The huge front door was open and two footmen in breeches and white stockings, with dull blue plush coats, solemnly came out to receive us and our luggage. They were extremely large men, and I nearly giggled, because it seemed to me the simplest thing for them to do was to pick us up, Standard and all and just carry us in and deposit us in the hall.

However one of them opened the car door on my side and the other opened Ambrose's door and we stepped out, feeling rather like dwarfs.

"I'll send a man to take your car to the garage, sir," said one footman, while the other preceded us up the flight of curved stone steps to the door.

"Frog footmen!" I murmured idiotically to Ambrose.

But he didn't seem amused. "Plug uglies," he said in a funny, considering sort of voice.

And when I came to think of it, that's just what they were. Plug-uglies. Faces like granite and those cold, pale-blue eyes. I must have looked a bit peculiar, because Ambrose giggled and took my arm.

"Never mind, my little duck," he said. "They shan't eat you!"

I wished he hadn't said that. It reminded me of another book, or rather story I'd read as a child. 'Fec-fi-fo-fum, I smell the blood of an Englishman.' And really those two footmen were large enough and ugly enough to be the giant of that story.

But then we were in the hall which was vast and vaulted (Ambrose told me later that some lunatic had ripped out the original ceiling and hacked the place about in order to put in that phoney vaulting), and the kind of butler who was too good to be true was bending a critical, aloof gaze upon us.

Ambrose was blandly despatched in charge of a footman to his room, and I was sent up to mine in charge of a maid. It was a very nice room with a tester bed and curtains of the coolest, prettiest chintz with a pattern of apple blossom. The windows looked out to the soft sky, and away beyond the big square of water with its stone balustrades, and somewhere outside a bird was chirping drowsily. And the maid was nice too. She was called Rose, and had freckles and a snub nose, and blue eyes with grey flecks in them and a nice gentle country voice. There was my own bathroom too, with a sunk marble tub in it, and shining taps and water that simply gushed out. Very film-star. If it hadn't been Mr Grogan's house I should have been positively enchanted. Though I wouldn't have wanted to live in that style always. Too grand. I like simple sort of things really. And rooms that are not too big. Mine was about as big as a small ballroom!

"If you will ring when you're ready, Miss," said Rose, "I'll take you down to the cocktail room."

"Thank you, Rose," I said. "Tell me . . . what time do we dress for dinner?"

"About half past seven, Miss," said Rose. "If you'll tell me what you're wearing, I'll put it out for you."

"I'm wearing the pale blue," I said firmly.

It occurred to me that anyone might have known to bring down at least two evening frocks. Probably the female guests changed their clothes three or four times a day anyway. And not one of them would be likely to wear the same evening frock twice running, much less three times.

"Dolt," I said to myself.

Still, I reflected when Rose had gone and I was doing my face in the superb mirror that had been placed in exactly the right light, I can always pretend to just be a

poor working girl, Ambrose's drudge, and be very meek and keep out of sight.

I was about to ring for Rose, because I knew I'd never find my way downstairs, much less to the cocktail room, when there was a bang on my door, and there was Ambrose.

He looked as if he was finding everything frightfully funny.

"Delia," he said, "it has to be seen to be believed. I've never seen so many suits of armour anywhere. Not even in the Great Metropolitan in New York. And my poor little suitcase evidently aroused the utmost disdain in the heart of the Plug-ugly. He can hardly bear to look at it. Come along. Let's go down and see Grogan and his girls and boys at play."

"But we don't know the way," I said. "The maid said that if I rang she'd come and show me."

"We'll find it ourselves," said Ambrose. "I like exploring. It may mean a walk of some miles, but we'll get there. Come along."

But at that moment a door opened some way along the big landing and a young man came out. He was very thin and very brown and had curly dark hair. His clothes quite plainly announced him as an American. He wore a green shirt and a white linen jacket, green slacks and canvas shoes. But he had a nice open face and a very beguiling grin.

"Hullo, folks," he said, "are you feeling lost in this palace? If so you have found a guide. Follow me through the ancestral halls to the modern side. I know the way perfectly."

"That's nice," said Ambrose mildly.

"Sure it's nice," said the young man. "When I first came here I was lost for six hours. The same might happen to

you, Brother. My name's Cobden, by the way, Mark Cobden."

"This is Delia Brown," said Ambrose. "And I'm Ambrose Merriman."

"Well, now we know each other, let's get going, I'm thirsty more than somewhat," said Mark Cobden and set off at a good pace along the wide landing, then round a corner, down a corridor, and then down a small staircase that wound down to a small hall whose walls were covered with tapestry.

"Old world!" remarked Mr Cobden appreciatively. "And now for nineteen fifty two."

He pushed open a door and we came into a biggish room with a curved bar taking up all of one end, and with one side composed entirely of plate glass that showed through it a formal paved terrace where bay trees stood in tubs and a flight of steps between carved stone balustrades led down to the swimming pool, which was like a blue jewel under the tranquil evening sky and with a background of two huge cedars. The evening was so still that nothing stirred, and the whole thing was like some exquisite stage set. In the bar itself the walls were of some greenish-white synthetic marble, which had a beautiful translucent effect and there were low palewood tables and very modern tubular chairs upholstered in off-white leather. The late sunlight slanted in through the huge windows and fell like rich gold upon the floor.

"Well, well, well," said Ambrose under his breath.

I said nothing. For that matter I had nothing at all to say, because I had just seen Grogan himself, and although I'd seen plenty of photographs of him looking like a bad tempered gorilla in expensive and beautifully cut suits, the reality was much worse. For one thing he had dark red hair

and a pair of blazing blue eyes under shaggy red brows, and for another he gave out the most incredible sense of power. Limitless, mindless, almost beautiful power like those beautiful turbine engines that drive ships, that seem to function with a passionless perfection quite independently of the engineers who serve them. And I remembered suddenly that of all the stories, rumours and speculations about him, there had never been any hint of scandal about women or love affairs. Never. And now I could see why. You might just as well suspect a dynamo of amorous propensities.

There were other people in the room, but for the first few minutes I didn't even notice them. There was only Grogan advancing to meet us. He *did* look like a gorilla with those immense shoulders and long arms, but he didn't walk like one. He walked with a controlled powerful precision like those oiled, rhythmically functioning turbines.

"Nice to see you, Ambrose," he said in a deep voice that had hardness in it. It wasn't harsh, but with that kind of extreme masculinity that you get in the voices of some Frenchmen. It was odd, I thought, him calling Ambrose by his christian name and then I remembered that Ambrose was supposed to be here as a friend, a friend who was interested in philately.

"Hullo then," said Ambrose with a kind of lazy amiability. "This is Miss Brown, by the way. You can trust her to treat stamps with proper respect too."

Grogan turned that power wave full onto me and I found myself smiling at him in what felt a servile propitiating way, but I asked Ambrose afterwards and he said it was merely my normal social smile, which differed from what he called my friendly, though moronic grin.

"Very nice of you to come, Miss Brown," said Grogan.

"We'll do our best to make you enjoy yourself. First I think you'd both better have a long cool drink. . . ."

He turned to a slender, pale coffee coloured boy who was behind the bar, and wore a white jacket and trousers, with G embroidered in royal blue thread on his breast pocket.

"John Collins, Peter," he said. "Two of them, beer for Mr Cobden, and pink 'gin for me."

I got the idea somehow or other that Mark Cobden didn't want beer and deeply resented being given it that way, as if he was a small boy who had to take what his elders ordered. I don't know just why I got that so strongly, because when I glanced at him he was smiling beguilingly at Grogan as if nothing could be nicer. But nevertheless, I did get it, but I didn't say anything to Ambrose about it, because I guessed that all he would do would be to grin odiously and make some remark about my psychic powers.

And just then a short woman, not slim, but with an exquisite plump little figure like someone out of a Watteau picture, wearing only a brassiere and shorts under a white turkish towelling wrap, got up from a chair where she had been sitting and staring rather broodily at an empty glass, and came over to us. She had short ash blonde curls all over a small round head and eyes the colour of wet slate. She wasn't very young, about forty, but you had to look twice to discover it, her make-up was so good and her skin so smooth, and her voice was young too.

She slipped a plump honey-coloured arm through Grogan's and said, "Henry, introduce me please. I think they look nice."

Grogan, with the same effortless ease with which he walked, removed his arm without apparently noticing he did so.

"They wouldn't really interest you, Lila," he said. "They don't gamble. But allow me . . . Miss Brown, this is Countess Lila Orvini . . . Lila, may I present Mr Merriman."

"How do you do," said Countess Orvini to Ambrose. She did include me in her smile, but only a little bit, just on the perimeter, as it were.

"How do you do?" said Ambrose and beamed at her in an avuncular way that is very annoying considering his age, and which he uses to women he considers predatory.

"Henry," said the Countess in a wistful way that did not match her little plump partridge look, "I am thirsty."

"My dear Lila," said Grogan, "the entire contents of my house, including the bar, are yours."

She gave a funny, throaty, but attractive little laugh.

"Oh no, Henry," she said, "don't be so rash. I might take you at your word and then you would find yourself without some of your most treasured possessions!"

He considered her for a moment with that terrifying blue stare, and then laughed abruptly.

"I believe I should," he said. "Consider the offer confined solely to the contents of the bar, my dear."

She sparkled at him, then at Ambrose, and finally at Mark Cobden, who was standing just by my side and silently imbibing his pint of beer.

"Oh, poor Mark," she exclaimed. "Has Henry put you on beer again?"

There was one of those silences that last a split second, but feel ugly while they last, and then Mark said, "Dear Lila, how sweet you are." He had gone a dark red and his eyes snapped.

"Lila," said Grogan in an expressionless voice, "it's time you went and got dressed."

She fluttered her eyelashes, which were very long and each lash was like a shining separate spike.

"Darlings," she said, "have I been tactless again? Mark, my angel, I didn't mean a thing."

"Run along," said Grogan.

"Oh dear," she said childishly. "I'm in disgrace again. Very well, Henry, I'll go like a good child."

He didn't smile, though she obviously meant him to, and she trailed off through the big, bizarre room, letting her wrap drag along the floor and dragging her feet in a disconsolate way.

Grogan watched her with a faint, grim smile, and when the door closed behind her, said, "She does it very prettily, doesn't she? But it palls." He turned to Mark and quite suddenly his manner changed and became friendly and pleasant. He put one hand on the boy's elbow and said, "Now don't let it annoy you, Mark. You know quite well she only does it to annoy." He looked at me and Ambrose and gave a wide, enchanting smile. "The fact is," he said, "that Mark here will play poker with Lila and the others, and they rook him. He hates me to say so, but they do. So—when there's going to be a poker game, I just keep him on beer. He gets rash on strong liquor."

Mark laughed reluctantly. "I guess that's so," he said. "But she gets me wild when she tries to make a monkey out of me in front of strangers."

"Who's playing tonight?" asked Grogan.

The sun had moved round off the swimming pool, which had become a cool greenish grey and reflected a pennon of rose that hung in the sky. The cedars were quite black now and in the bar the light was pale and watery as if we were at the bottom of a lake.

"Lila, Jan and Duncan," said Mark. "Me and that fellow

Collingwood. Oh, and Pierre Dumont. He's staying with Duncan." He was leaning on the bar and the look of anger had left his face. Now he looked young and friendly, and musing. Probably over the coming poker game, I thought, when suddenly he looked at me and said, "Do you play?"

"Certainly not," said Ambrose before I could answer. "She can grasp the subtleties of Snap and Beggar My Neighbour, but that's the extent of her card sense."

"Sit by me and bring me luck this evening," said Mark. His smile became youthful and earnest. "I need some luck."

I didn't want to do it. I didn't feel I'd bring him any kind of luck at all. There wasn't any luck about the place at all, I found myself thinking. But again before I could answer and say that watching cards bored me, and that I always brought the most frightful bad luck to anyone, Ambrose butted in again.

"Yes, Delia. Do just that," he said. "It will amuse you while I look at this terrific stamp collection. How's that with you?" He ended turning to Grogan.

"It's fine with me," said Grogan.

In the watery pallid light some of his force seemed to have evaporated. You couldn't see the blue blaze of his eyes for one thing, but his incredible dark red hair seemed to have gathered some luminance of its own. It seemed to flicker like little hellish flames above his head. Of course, I told myself, you're just being ultra imaginative. But I wanted to get out of that bar more than I'd ever wanted anything for a long time.

Ambrose swallowed the last of his drink.

"I should think it's time I went and changed," he said. "And as for Delia! It takes her about an hour and a half to do the simplest thing."

That was a diabolical lie, but I was so relieved to think

of getting away and up to my nice chintzy room, that I didn't even bother to glare at him.

"Why shouldn't she?" said Mark Cobden in an aggressive strained voice. "Why shouldn't a girl as pretty as she is do whatever she likes?"

"Why not indeed," said Ambrose amiably.

I started off towards the door and I was thinking that if a pint of beer had that effect on Mark Cobden, it was very sensible of Grogan not to let him drink spirits.

Ambrose ambled placidly by my side as I went up to my room. He seemed preoccupied and I was feeling bitter. This was worse than I'd even expected and he wasn't even trying to cheer me up.

At the door of my room, however, he patted my shoulder affectionately.

"Keep your weather eye open on young Cobden and the Countess tonight, ducks," he said. "I've an idea it might be interesting." He grinned suddenly and kissed the top of my head. "You're a nice child sometimes," he said.

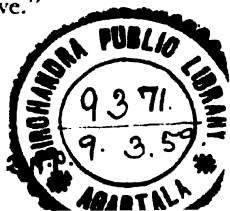
I didn't ask him why he thought it might be interesting. He wouldn't have told me anyway, because he always said that if you knew what to look for, you always found it, just because you expected to find it. But if you didn't know, then whatever you saw you probably saw accurately. Not always . . . but very often.

"Look very beautiful," he added. "It's plain to me that the competition here is very fierce."

"I could have told you so before we came," I said crossly.

"Well, never mind," he said in a consoling tone. "You have youth on your side and that's half the battle. About a quarter of a century start, has Countess Lila Orvini. You were in your cradle when she hit twenty five."

He ambled off and I went in to dress.



CHAPTER TWO

JAN FAVERSHAM turned out to be the girl I had seen streak past in the car when Ambrose and I arrived. She still looked very pale, and though she was one of those people who have a natural pallor, one of those translucent sort of skins, still it was very obvious, I thought, that she was paler than she should be. She had a matt pallor instead of a translucent one. She was really rather lovely, very tall and slender, with shining dark hair that folded back from her temples like wings, while her mouth was full and generous and she had an incongruous dimple in her chin. When I was introduced to her, she smiled faintly and said, "How do you do? Have you come to join us in the Poker game?"

It seemed an odd thing to ask straight off like that. As if the Poker game was something deeply significant and important. Besides, she frowned slightly as she spoke, and her lids dropped over her nut-coloured eyes.

"No," I said casually. "I came with Ambrose Merri-man . . ."

She gave a little gasping sigh and looked quickly at the young man by her side.

"Ambrose Merriman," she exclaimed.

I remembered that Ambrose had said he had a strong idea that the Tintoretto was a fake and just what kind of a bad shindy there would be if it was.

"Ambrose is mad on stamps," I added. "I think he's going to be absolutely green with envy when he goes through Mr Grogan's collection."

"Oh, it's stamps this time," she murmured. "Oh, I'm sorry, but you don't know Duncan Carstairs, do you?"

I didn't know him and I didn't like him. He was a lowering young man with a sulky expression and a heavy jaw. Some people might have called it a strong jaw. I'm sure they would have in a woman's magazine. But to me it was just a heavy, stubborn jaw with a hint of brutality in it.

He looked at me without smiling and said, "And how does it feel to be the valued assistant of the great Merri-man?" in a very disagreeable voice.

"Duncan!" said Jan Faversham, and sighed.

"I suppose," I said carefully, "that it feels much the same as being the assistant to anyone who's an expert on any subject . . . and I don't know what you mean by 'valued'. Anyone could do what I do. I just make lists and take notes."

Grogan was a little way away, talking to a thin man with sparse sandy hair and a plain face, which nevertheless was rather attractive. He had pale blue eyes with a twinkle in them, and Grogan seemed absolutely absorbed by what he was saying, but all the same I had an uneasy feeling that Grogan was really listening to Jan Faversham.

Ambrose was in a corner with Countess Orvini. She had made a bee-line for him the moment he came into the room, and with a terrific amount of vivacity and eye-play had commanded him to come and talk to her. She was wearing white again. White velvet, very much draped and very low in the neck, and she seemed to have forgotten completely the scene before in the bar, for she waved gaily to Mark Cobden (who merely smiled politely), and blew a kiss to Grogan, who appeared not to have noticed it, but all the same I had the same idea as I had about my own

small group—that he was acutely aware of everything that was going on.

And just then Mark Cobden, who had been standing by Grogan and the thin man, came over to us and smiled at me. He smiled at Jan too, but in a different way. He had smiled at me with a comradely charm, but in his smile to Jan there was a kind of subtle intimacy, not a friendly intimacy, but as if he shared some secret with her. She didn't smile back, she only looked at him gravely, and a soft rose glowed through the pallor in her cheeks.

"Hullo, Mark," she said.

"You're looking very beautiful," said Mark, and pushed his hands into his pockets and teetered from heel to toe with a gentle rocking movement. He smiled separately at Duncan Carstairs and said, "Hello Duncan! Been painting any masterpieces lately?" And before Carstairs could reply, swung round to me and added, "Duncan is an artist. Very temperamental. It makes his poker game a bit erratic."

"It seems to me," I said, in what I hoped was my best light conversational way, "that Poker seems to be a very important thing to you all."

"Oh, it is," Mark agreed lazily. "It sure is. The game of Poker pervades the atmosphere. Bluff—counter bluff! And not only at the card table."

Duncan's face became quite dark with anger; he turned abruptly and walked away to the other side of the room. Jan Faversham looked at Mark with an odd air of reproach and then followed Duncan. She put one hand on his arm and began to talk to him earnestly, but he shook her off rudely and helped himself to a drink from one of the decanters on a walnut side table.

"He sure has got pretty manners and a pretty temper," said Mark thoughtfully.

"Well, why did you bait him like that?" I asked. "You were doing just that, you know."

"I don't like him," said Mark and smiled down at me disarmingly. "Maybe that's no excuse, but he just gets under my skin. Surly brute."

He looked at me for a moment and then said, "Guess you think I'm just a brash American with no manners. Well, maybe I am at that. Only he does sure get my goat. Let's forget it. Do you know who that is, the one talking to our good host?"

I shook my head.

"Well, that's Edward J. Collingwood, the economist. Now I would sure like to know what Grogan got him here for."

"Perhaps just as a gesture of hospitality!" I suggested meekly, and he looked down at me and laughed.

"Snubbed," he said. "That was a real, chilly, honest-to-goodness British snub. But I didn't deserve it, you know. It's a fact that Grogan only asks people to his parties for some very good reason. Sometimes for very devious ones, they're going to be useful to him some way or other. It's never just simply because he likes them."

Without thinking I glanced from Lila to Jan Faversham and Mark laughed again.

"Oh, sure," he said, "they're both glamorous enough to constitute a good reason for any other man. But not for Grogan. Lila stooges for him, of course. I don't quite know why Jan's here . . . she didn't want to be here. I know that."

I felt my face setting into that stiff, frozen feeling that comes to me when someone is saying or doing something that I have been brought up to believe is all wrong. Bad form, if you like. But discussing one's host with a stranger

is one of them, and there was something spiteful in the way Mark was talking.

He obviously saw I was getting what Ambrose calls so rudely, toffee-nosed, and he looked solemn and said, "Now I'm talking the way you don't like. I guess I'd better apologise, but we all do it here. For just that reason, I reckon. We all know that Grogan has some reason for having us, and we all know we're sponging on him. Now I've told you the worst. Except Collingwood, of course. He's probably come down on top secret stuff about foreign exchanges or something."

Just then the butler announced dinner. Grogan came over with Collingwood, and said in that unexpectedly attractive voice, "Miss Brown, allow me to present Mr Collingwood. We're going in to dinner informally, and I want you to come in with me and sit between me and Collingwood. That will stop us talking shop and finance."

I would much rather have sat below the salt with Ambrose, but it was obvious that I wouldn't have a chance to do so; and more, that it was going to be awfully difficult to get any kind of private word with him. Lila Orvini alone would see to that. Somehow I had got infected with the general suspicious atmosphere, thanks to Mark Cobden, and had the absurd idea that Grogan himself didn't intend to let me get together with Ambrose, for some reason or other.

But there it was. I was marched in to the big, crimson-curtained dining room between Grogan and Collingwood, and the only comfort I had was Collingwood, who looked down at me from his lanky six foot two and twinkled, as if he understood just how frustrated I was feeling.

"I've had enough of talking shop to Grogan anyway," he said. "He's a rabid type of banker and financier, and such are the sworn enemies of idealistic economists."

One of the plug-ugly footmen pulled out my chair for me and then pushed me up to the table rather as if I was a small child in a high chair. I almost expected him to tie a bib round my neck. I was feeling disgruntled and uneasy and quite unable to do anything about it. I saw Ambrose glance down at me from his end of the table. He didn't actually wink, but there was a tremor of his left eyelid, which I recognised as his version of a discreet wink. It made me feel much better, because it showed that he was keeping an eye on me in spite of Lila Orvini's great seduction act.

Jan Faversham was sitting between Mark and Duncan Carstairs, with Mark next to Grogan, and Lila was next to Collingwood. But she paid no attention to him at all, just went on talking to Ambrose as if she'd known him for twenty years, but her voice was so husky and confidential that I couldn't get a clue what she was talking about.

I did hear Grogan say to Mark at one moment during dinner, which was simply delicious, "I hear you won last night, Mark."

Mark gave a deprecatory little laugh. "I sure did," he said. "And it was about time too, Sir."

"Well, don't fly too high on the strength of it," said Grogan in a fatherly manner. "Just remember Luck is the Bitch Goddess."

And just then Lila stopped talking to Ambrose, leaned across Collingwood and said in a husky screech, "Henry, where's Pierre?"

"I didn't ask him to dine with us," said Grogan blandly.

"Oh, Henry, how unkind," said Lila, and pouted. "Poor Pierre!"

I began to wish I hadn't been quite so snubbing to Mark, but had let him talk on. I had a feeling it would be awfully useful to know about all these people and what their

relationship was to each other and why. It was certainly one of the most uncomfortable and ill-assorted house parties that could have been devised. There were under-currents running strongly all over the place and I got the macabre idea into my head that some of the dinner parties given by the Borgias must have been rather like this.

"Cheer up," said Collingwood in my ear. "I know just how you feel."

I didn't believe he could. Economists in my imagination were not the kind of people who caught atmospheres, or were perceptive. No! I always considered that their object in life was to make existence as dull as possible for everybody, added to which they were quite inhuman! Always planning to balance a budget in five hundred years time, provided everyone trudged along paying taxes and not buying anything at all and exporting everything for the intervening four hundred and ninety nine. But it was nice of him to seem understanding. I supposed I must have been looking what Ambrose calls broody, and he just thought I needed a kind word or something.

But Grogan heard and turned quickly to me. He looked concerned and, though difficult to credit, kind.

"Does this kind of party bother you?" he asked seriously. "I can quite imagine that it does. Never mind. If you will endure it until tomorrow, when Merriman and I will have got our business over, I'll see that you have something really pleasant to do."

He glanced round his guests with a queer, speculative look in those gentian blue eyes.

Then he turned to me again. "Even if I am unexpectedly occupied," he said, "I'll hand you over to Collingwood and Merriman and they shall take you sailing. My yacht's at Middlehaven, and it's only twenty miles away."

"I hope Merriman can sail a yacht," said Collingwood.

"Even if he can't," said Grogan. "Webster's there. I can let you all go with Webster with complete peace of mind."

Mark had been listening and he said suddenly, "Can't I join this yachting trip? I go mad about yachting."

"It depends whether I need you or not," said Grogan flatly, and Mark subsided.

It occurred to me suddenly that Mark must be employed by Grogan in some capacity. Exactly what was difficult to say, but perhaps as a social secretary, their relationship seemed odd, and Mark did not seem to behave like a guest, more like a favourite at court, allowed some license, but liable to be put down at any moment.

And just then Duncan Carstairs broke across the entire web of conversation by saying stridently, "And why wasn't Dumont asked to dine?"

Grogan really behaved very well. He merely said coldly, "Allow me to decide who I invite to my table, Carstairs, even if you do not approve of my choice."

And Lila, with a little gasp, stood up, looked at Jan and me and said, "Shall we go and have coffee in the drawing room?"

I was only half-way through my ice pudding, but I was only too thankful to leave it and go with her. I wondered how on earth Duncan Carstairs had the nerve to go on sitting there; but he did, looking dark and sulky and crumbling a piece of bread into small dirty pellets.

"Really, Jan," said Lila when we got into the big drawing room, where a chandelier was glistening and twinkling in the centre of a painted ceiling and tall windows were open to the soft blue night, "how that appalling young man has the idiocy to behave like that, I cannot conceive."

"He hates Henry," said Jan in a stifled voice. She sat

down in a high-backed tapestry chair and presented her profile to us.

"Who doesn't?" asked Lila indifferently. "But it is pure folly to annoy him. Especially at this moment."

I wanted to say that I didn't hate Henry. Because I didn't any more. For that matter one might just as well have hated Stonehenge or any other massive, overpowering piece of rock. Hating Henry Grogan was pure waste of time and energy. He wouldn't care and you would become dazed and bruised by hating him. Just, I realised suddenly, as Duncan Carstairs was dazed and bruised by his futile hatred.

"Look," said Jan with unexpected energy, "leave us alone, Lila. We didn't want to come, but we had to. Well, now we're here, just leave us alone."

Lila grinned like a gutter-snipe. "Duncan would do better to hate Pierre!" she remarked.

"And why is Ambrose Merriman here?" Jan asked in a taut voice.

Lila shrugged and looked at me with one eyebrow raised.

"My dear," she said, "can you answer that question?"

"Stamps," I said briefly.

"Stamps," said Jan with angry scorn. "It's that foul picture. Lila . . . it's about that picture. I am sure of it."

Lila looked at her with a quizzical, glinting smile. "My dear," she said, "why are you so worried about that picture? It is nothing to do with you."

"Pierre found it," said Jan in a choked voice. "Pierre found it and sold it to Henry Grogan. Through you!"

"But darrrrrling," said Lila softly, rolling her r's exaggeratedly, "what is wrong with that? Pierre finds a masterpiece . . . and he needs money. I help him to find

a private buyer, instead of him having to sell to a dealer and so make not so much money."

And now I knew for certain that the Tintoretto was a fake and I didn't know what to do about it. Somehow or other, before he was whisked off into conference with Grogan, I must get a few minutes alone with Ambrose and tell him about all this.

"Yes," said Jan slowly. "Yes. Of course. I'm sorry, Lila, but I'm a mass of nerves these days and Duncan . . ."

"I do not know why you endure this Duncan and his tantrums," said Lila briskly. "It is a folly in you, Jan."

"It's not his fault," said Jan stubbornly. "He's had a horrible time and I've known him since he was seventeen. I'm sorry for him."

"Well," said Lila, becoming more of a pseudo Italian countess every moment, "let us not discuss it in front of Miss Brown. It is quite execrable of us . . . bad manners of the most bad description."

She turned a dazzling smile onto me. "We shall talk of Miss Delia Brown," she announced, "who is so discreet and so pretty."

"Please don't," I said politely. "I am not at all interesting."

"Of that I am not so sure," said Lila. "But of a certainty you are discreet. Tell me, do you not find us all very tiresome?"

I was saved from answering by the arrival of Edward Collingwood, who came rather shyly into the room and said, "Countess, Grogan asked me to come and tell you that he has gone up to his own room with Merriman, and that he hopes we will all do exactly what we like. Cobden and Carstairs have already gone into the cardroom."

"Damn," I thought. "Damn, damn, damn, *damn!*"

And I was quite unreasonably furious with Ambrose for not having used his brains and known that it was important that he saw me before he was shown that picture. He must have realised during dinner that all these people were high explosive and might go sky high any minute. And then I relaxed, thinking grimly that even Ambrose would find it difficult to avoid doing what Henry Grogan had decided was to happen.

"Good! Then let us all go there at once," said Lila happily. "But where can Pierre be?"

"At the bottom of a deep river, I hope," said Edward Collingwood with deep feeling.

Jan frowned heavily, then strolled out of the room without another word.

"Pouf!" said Lila and grinned. "She does not like my poor Pierre spoken of, that one."

Edward Collingwood nodded solemnly. "So I would imagine!" he said ambiguously, and stood back to let us out of the door.

CHAPTER THREE

THE POKER ROOM was rather fascinating even to me, who simply don't have any kind of card sense at all. But I do have a kind of thing about gambling. I'm quite sure that if ever I went into the gaming rooms in Monte Carlo I would be quite breathless and fascinated. And perhaps it is that a room that is used entirely for gambling acquires some kind of tenseness. The tables wait. The cards placed in the middle of the green baize wait. And the players wait too, tense and worshipping, bowing down to the Bitch Goddess, as Grogan said. And the Bitch Goddess Luck herself waits there in the room, immobile and blank-faced, waiting to bestow her blessing on someone. And they are all anxiously placating her.

This room had tapestry hung walls, and a brilliant light fell over the poker table, isolating it and throwing the lovely hangings into ignoble shadow. Its circle of green baize was immaculate, and two new packs of cards lay exactly in the centre. Round the bright green circle were hollowed out open graves filled with red, blue, yellow, green and white chips. Each colour stacked in its own column.

"Cut for seats," said Lila sharply.

Mark shuffled together seven separate cards and spread them face downwards on the table.

But before they could cut, the door opened and Pierre Dumont came in. Or rather he made an entrance. Because he stood in the doorway for at least thirty seconds,

silhouetted by the dazzle of light from the small ante room. He wasn't very tall, about five foot ten, but he was very neat and slender and compact. Somehow I had expected him to be dark and gigolo-ish, but he was fair in a very Scandinavian way, almost lint-white hair, and very light blue eyes, china blue really. He stood there smiling for that thirty seconds and striking an attitude so that one almost expected him to throw off a cloak with a scarlet lining and then bow and make a leg.

He wore a crimson carnation in his lapel and tails, not a dinner jacket, and when he dropped his pose and came into the room, he walked lightly and stealthily like a cat.

"Darrreeng," said Lila, rolling her r's and exaggerating the caressing quality of her foreign accent. "My angel Pierre!"

He smiled at her in the way a lover smiles, isolating her for a moment from everyone else in the room. And then he turned the smile off just as electric light is switched off, and glanced round the room.

He smiled suddenly and with great charm at Jan, but she only nodded a greeting and did not smile back; and Duncan moved up close beside her as if to protect her from something.

"Pierre," trilled Lila, "you know everyone, except Miss Delia Brown . . . and Mr Collingwood."

She seemed to get a malicious amusement out of saying my name. Pierre bowed at me and gave me yet another variety of smile. This time it was eager and deferential. And to Collingwood, he gave a serious, respectful smile, so that I thought he really managed his smiles remarkably well and wondered whether he practised them in front of a looking glass. I didn't like him even though he was so boyish and clean-cut and good-looking. He had a remark-

able nose, very high and Roman, with nostrils that looked as if they had been sculptured, and his mouth was very mobile, thin but with a curved upper lip like a true cupid's bow. And suddenly I saw the look of pain in Jan Faver-sham's face and realised that she was quite sick with love for him.

"We can cut now," said Lila and once again she was breathless and her eyes brilliant with expectancy.

"Sure," said Mark.

I noticed that everyone spoke under their breath as if they were in a cathedral or something, and then with one accord they each put out a hand and took a card from the seven spread out on the sharp green of the baize.

"Oh!" said Lila in husky disappointment. "Five. Five is *not* lucky to me!"

"I am two!" said Pierre in a light, philosophical tone. "Two! So dull a little number." He saw one card left on the table and looked at me. "Do you not play?" he asked.

I shook my head and he threw up his hands in horror.

"You do not play Poker? But you miss so much!"

Lila was looking at Jan.

"Darling," she wheedled. "You have drawn seven. Change 'wiz me? You always say you do not mind about numbers, that you have not the superstitions."

"I like seven," said Jan coldly and with satisfaction.

"You will not be lucky in eet," said Lila gloomily. "You will not be lucky at all!"

I noticed that her foreign accent varied. Sometimes it was hardly noticeable and for a moment it occurred to me that perhaps she was not foreign at all, but only pretending to be for some reason of her own.

But since she had not got her own way with Jan, she shrugged ostentatiously and sat down in front of the bin

(they called the little hollows where the chips were, bins) marked five, and the others all sat down in front of their own numbers and began to count their chips, making a soft clicking sound as they did so. Lila was five, and next to her in six, was Mark, Jan seven, and then Duncan opposite the bin marked one, then there was Pierre at two and a blank space at three, and then Collingwood in four beside Lila. He looked at me and smiled.

"Sit next to me in three and bring me luck," he said.

"Now that will be charming," said Pierre, "because she will also be next to me, and perhaps it will be to me she brings the luck. We shall see."

Mark gave me a most brash grin across the table. "Yes," he said, "we shall see."

Lila glanced sideways at him, and her teeth showed in a narrow white line between slightly parted lips.

"Do you doubt it, Mark?" she asked curiously.

"I always doubt the wisdom of appealing to Luck," he said cheerfully. "It seems to annoy the lady sometimes and she withdraws the hem of her garment."

"It would be a pity if she withdrew it from Pierre," said Lila. "He needs it so much. Do you not think so, Mark?"

"Like so many other ladies," said Mark, "she so often throws herself into the arms of those who do not court her."

"But not tonight," said Lila and there was an odd harshness in her voice and an emphasis that seemed significant. "Not tonight, Mark. I think perhaps it is good that Miss Delia Brown brings luck to Pierre!"

"Why not cut for deal," said Duncan boorishly, "instead of talking nonsense. Luck will go where she likes."

Collingwood cut the deal, shuffled and handed the pack

to Pierre to cut; as he began to deal Lila fished a small china box out of her bag, took a pill out of it and put it on the small table that stood between her and Mark for drinks and cigarettes to stand on.

"Pierre, my sweet," she said. "Make me a huge gin, please. I must take my pillule."

"You take too many," said Pierre, almost thoughtfully; but he got up obediently, went to a table in a corner, poured out a drink and gave it to her. She was looking at her hand as he did so and flipped them together in a practised manner so that he could not see them.

They began to play with an intensity that I found absolutely alarming. If this is what Poker does to you, I thought, I'm glad I'm not card-minded. At the same time it was fascinating; but although Collingwood showed me his cards as they went on and tried to explain, I couldn't make head or tail of it. Still it did seem as if I had not brought Pierre any luck. He kept on losing quite heavily. So far as I could understand he had good cards, but always someone had better, and that, according to what they all said, was the worst kind of luck, but absolutely the worst.

Once when no one was left in except Pierre and Lila, she suddenly threw in her hand after betting quite high, so that he won. And Mark Cobden, who had dealt, gave her a queer, amused grin.

"No use bluffing against Pierre," he said.

Pierre's chin jerked up aggressively. "I had a full house," he said.

Lila shrugged. "Mine was only a straight," she sighed. "I just guessed it was no good going on."

"You drew two cards and filled a straight?" said Duncan sceptically.

"It happens sometimes," said Lila composedly.

I began to get icy butterflies up and down my spine, and I noticed that Collingwood was watching her with a thoughtful frown, as if he too found the atmosphere charged in some way.

"Sometimes," said Duncan morosely.

And all the time Jan Faversham said nothing, but became shadowy, and paler than ever. Once she got up, poured herself a drink and walked right round the table back to her own seat, looking at the hands of the people who were betting. She hardly played at all herself. Hand after hand she threw down on the table with an air of fatigued boredom, which somehow wasn't genuine. She was *anything* but bored. It seemed to me that she was taut with expectancy and I guessed it must be because of Ambrose, closeted somewhere with Grogan and the Tintoretto. I wished very much indeed that we had not come down here. I wished it more and more.

Lila kept on winning big pots. Mark seemed to be holding his own, but Pierre and Duncan kept on losing. Pierre was insouciant about it, but Duncan became sulky and aggressive. I wished I could give up and go to bed, because it wasn't fascinating any more; just rather unpleasant.

And then suddenly I was aware that Pierre was quiet and tense with excitement. His face showed nothing. He was looking at his cards with a thoughtful, dubious air, but I could feel excitement flowing out of him, and wondered whether Duncan felt the same. But Duncan was hunched sulkily over his cards, so centred on himself that nothing touched him.

It had been Mark's deal. Jan was the last to come in, and Duncan the first to speak. He pushed some chips in front of him and grunted "I play". Pierre cocked his head

on one side, smiled dubiously, and raised the stake. Collingwood raised an eyebrow and threw his cards in; but Lila, with a shrug, put up her stake too. So did Mark. But Jan once again threw in as if she found everything suddenly beastly and intolerable. . . .

Now I've got to get this right. I checked it over afterwards with Collingwood to be sure, because not knowing anything about the game, I didn't pay too much attention to what cards they drew. But Duncan drew one card. Pierre hesitated and then said, "Play these"; Lila drew two cards and Mark drew one. They began to bet cautiously, going up by small raises, but I knew that whatever happened Pierre would go on and on. At twenty pounds Duncan threw in. Pierre made it twenty-five. Lila hesitated and saw him. Mark threw in, and he too had something tense and expectant about him, only different from Jan and her expectancy. They both seemed to be waiting for something, but for Jan it was something terrible and for Mark it was something very strong and important, something exciting that amused him. He was watching Pierre all the time.

Pierre, with a leisurely bravado, spread his hand face up on the table, and I heard Collingwood make a clicking sound with his tongue against his palate.

Duncan put down his own hand and it was a full house, kings high. He looked angry and incredulous.

"Royal Flush in Spades," he said. "It's not true."

His voice trailed miserably and Jan looked at him quickly and with anxiety, while Lila, with a heavy frown literally furrowing her brow, put down her cards, stared at them and murmured, "But too neat. Altogezzer too neat."

She had four nines.

Mark grinned affably. "I guess that rates drinks all round," he said. "What do you say, Duncan?"

"I need one," said Lila loudly. "Get me one too, Duncan."

Duncan got up with a surly gloom and Lila gave a shrill laugh.

"A cup of cold poison!" she exclaimed.

Pierre and Mark got up too and went over to the drinks table and Lila sat still, but her hands were on the table and she tapped nervously and incessantly with the forefinger of her right hand on the polished surround of her bin.

I saw that Collingwood was frowning too, and his nice plain face had become cold and troubled. Slightly disgusted he is, I thought; but although there'd been plenty not to like during the evening I couldn't see why this was worse than anything else.

Someone, I didn't notice who, put a drink down by my side. And then Mark and everyone was back at the table, and Mark said, "Well, before we pay Pierre his pounds of flesh, I think we ought to drink his health."

Lila picked up her glass, put it to her lips, and then suddenly and horribly, her face became distorted and she made a beastly, raucous, retching sound, jerked violently and collapsed. Her glass fell onto the floor, but the carpet was so thick that it didn't make a sound, and for what seemed like a century everyone sat transfixed, staring at her, with their glasses half-way up to their mouths.

Then Jan Faversham gave a sad, hopeless little groan and said, "Oh Duncan . . . Oh Duncan . . . how . . .?"

Duncan shouted at her in a loud ugly voice, "What the devil do you mean? I didn't do anything! It's nothing to do with me!"

Edward Collingwood stood up quietly.

"Don't touch her," he said sharply to Mark.

And he went over to the door and rang the bell.

"But we ought to help her," stammered Mark.

"Nothing can help her," said Collingwood. "She's dead."

The door was opened by one of the plug-uglies, and Collingwood said to him, "Go and get Mr Grogan. Tell him there has been a serious accident. It's important."

The footman looked incuriously round the room, said "Yes Sir" in a flat voice and went away.

Nobody moved after that and a faint smell of bitter almonds drifted in the warm, heavy air.

I couldn't be anything that I knew Ambrose would want me to be at that moment. Alert, observant, all that kind of thing. I just felt sick. The room felt as if it was closing in on us all; the sombre tapestries moving in on the round table where the hard light flooded down on the pure deep green of the baize with the cards, shiny and brightly coloured, lying spread out on it. Pierre's Royal Flush in Spades was put down very neatly, like a small fan, and superstition swam vaguely into my mind. Spades! Cards of death and ill-omen. I was going to pieces, I told myself wildly, and I must have shivered or something, because Edward Collingwood put a large cool hand on mine and murmured, "I know. Hold on though . . . it's got to be gone through."

Then Grogan was coming into the room with Ambrose behind him. He looked at Lila once and then round the entire table with a look that was full of menace. His face was very white and above it his red hair flamed.

"Well," he said coldly, "which of you did it? Well, it

doesn't matter now. We'll find out. Collingwood, have you sent for the police?"

"I left that to you," said Collingwood. "But nothing's been touched."

Grogan looked over his shoulder. "Get the police, will you, Merriman. And a doctor, of course. In the meantime, we'll just stay here, just as we are."

Jan Faversham caught her breath in a thick sob. "I—I can't," she exclaimed.

"You'll have to," said Grogan. "All of you."

Nobody spoke after that. Pierre leaned back in his chair with his hands in his pockets and his mouth pursed as if he was whistling. Duncan Carstairs sat slumped and morose. Under his thick dark hair his face looked green. Jan, with an obvious effort, sat very straight in her chair, her lips were slightly parted and you could see that her teeth were clenched. Mark Cobden sat with his elbows on the table and an expression of puzzled concern on his young face, his mouth drooped unhappily.

Grogan stood like a sentinel by the door and the minutes dragged by.

Ambrose came back.

"They're on their way," he said. "I told your butler to bring them straight along to this room."

He looked over at me and smiled reassuringly, though very seriously, and I could see by the look in his eyes that however unobservant and useless I had been, he was making up for it now. Just for an instant his gaze rested on the Royal Flush: his left eyebrow lifted a fraction and he looked at the other cards thoughtfully.

The light from the ante-room fell on Grogan's hair and made it shine and threw shadows under his cheekbones, so that he looked haggard and relentless. He was staring at

Lila's huddled body and it seemed to me there was an unexpected pity in the set of his mouth and his eyes.

The police came at last and their matter-of-fact manner was a relief in a way. The doctor was with them, a tall, burly man with grey hair and a red face. They didn't want us in the room after the first few minutes. Collingwood explained briefly what had happened and then we were ushered out with a uniformed constable hovering near all the time. Grogan told them that the drawing room was the best place for us to wait, and we straggled along through the silent house like a flock of sheep. Ambrose had spoken to the man in charge—a Superintendent, I gathered—before he came along with us. He came up with Collingwood and me and walked alongside. As we went through the hall I saw there were men there with some kind of paraphernalia, and I guessed that Ambrose had made no bones about anything on the telephone. He'd plainly said it was murder, because I was sure the men were photographers and finger-print experts.

One of the men said something to another and they both laughed. I thought how awful it was to laugh at a time like this, and then I knew it was a silly thing to think. It was their job and a body was just a body to them. They saw lots of bodies. But all the same. . . .

In the drawing room we broke up into groups. Jan and Duncan sat together on a sofa as far away from everyone else as they could get. Mark and Pierre went and poured themselves out gin and stood by the fireplace and talked to each other in a spasmodic way. Ambrose and Edward Collingwood and I sat together in a corner. And the policeman sat tactfully in a far corner and stared at the ceiling.

"This is a pretty pickle, my poor moppet," said Ambrose to me. "And that Tintoretto is a fake. Everything is very nasty indeed."

"I think," observed Collingwood politely, "that Miss Brown could do with a brandy. She's been very brave."

"She shall have a brandy," said Ambrose benevolently.

He wandered over to the inevitable table with drinks on it, poured out a stiff brandy, tipped in a little water and wandered back again.

"Swallow it," he said firmly and stood looking down at me kindly. "By the way," he added, "the Superintendent will interview you and Collingwood first. Don't get fussed. Just tell him exactly what happened and what you saw."

"I didn't see anything," I said gloomily. "I'm no good at all. I was so confused."

"Not to worry," he said. "It's up to him to fish out what's important and what's not."

He looked at Collingwood. "Did you notice anything?" he asked.

Collingwood frowned. "I noticed quite a lot," he said, "but nothing that seems of any value as evidence. There was a lot of tension between them all and a lot of antagonism." He looked at Ambrose thoughtfully. "I can tell you one thing," he said. "That young man Coburn is a very clever card sharper. Twice he made a phoney deal. The last one was that royal flush."

The room was so big and we were talking so quietly that no one could hear what was said. But it was uncanny really. Three sets of people all talking about the same thing, and talking separately, and no one group knowing what the others were saying.

Then we all relapsed into silence and I sat trying to think who it was had given Lila that last gin. I knew

Duncan had been asked to, but I had a kind of idea that he hadn't done so. He'd given Jan a drink, but not Lila. But I couldn't be sure of it. All three men had been moving about. Mark and Duncan and Pierre. I tried awfully hard to remember, but it was no good. Everything was so confused.

"Do we have to sit here all night?" said Duncan loudly and aggressively.

Ambrose looked over at him. "Could be," he said mildly. "Murder is quite an important thing, don't you think?"

"Why should it be murder?" demanded Duncan sullenly. "Why? She might quite easily have done herself in with all those foul drugs she was always taking."

"Could be," said Ambrose again. "But the police naturally wish to take no chances."

Pierre looked at Ambrose with a china-blue stare.

"I think you are right," he said politely, and with the slightest trace of a foreign accent. "Lila could be foolish in many ways, but over what Duncan chooses to call her drugs, she was not foolish. But most careful."

"Besides," he added calmly, "pheno barbitone or benzedrine, they do not convulse a person. Not in the least."

Duncan glared at him like a stupid, enraged bull, but Jan Faversham put her thin narrow hand on his sleeve and looked at him with beseeching tragic eyes, so he sank back onto the sofa and went into a black melancholy.

"Don't let's discuss it," said Jan in a thread of a voice. "Please don't let's. I can't bear it."

Pierre looked across at her with polite sympathy.

"Ah now, my poor Jan," he said softly. "No one would accuse you. Do not fear that for one moment."

"Shut up you swine," said Duncan.

Pierre shrugged and looked up to heaven.

Ambrose was sitting by my side. He said, under his breath, "A nice lot really . . . all out to hang each other."

Collingwood said, as if to himself, "The person they ought all to wish to hang is Grogan . . . for collecting them all together. It was a pretty damnable thought on his part."

Ambrose said nothing and just then the door opened and a plain-clothes man came in and said: "Miss Brown?"

"Yes," I said shakily.

I was right back in the schoolroom and the headmistress had sent for me.

"The Superintendent would like to see you, Miss Brown," said the man civilly. "Will you come with me?"

Ambrose pushed me to my feet. "Go on, my poor little duck," he said, and gave an outrageous but heartening grin. "No manacles are to be seen."

Feeling very sick again I stood up and walked over to the door. As I went everyone stared at me intently and, it seemed to me, with apprehension. But I didn't know anything, so what had they to fear?

CHAPTER FOUR

SUPERINTENDENT HOLLOW was a short, narrow man with a narrow head and ridiculous, wispy, baby hair that blew about in the slightest draught. He had a large nose and a mobile mouth and innocent grey eyes; but he wasn't at all the kind of man I would like to try and deceive. And I'm fairly good at knowing who you can deceive. After all one learns at school when you discover that some mistresses look too easy for anything and turn out to be as sharp as a kukris. Hollow was like that.

He gave me a kind, child-like smile and asked me to sit down, offered me a cigarette and then asked me to tell him just what had happened all through the poker game, in just the same sickening reassuring manner with which the dentist tells you it's not going to hurt—much.

So I told him everything I could remember, just as I've written it down here, and he listened with a sort of flattering attention as if I was telling him something quite delightful. And when I'd finished, he fiddled about with a pencil and said, "What did the pill look like that Countess Orvini took out of her box?"

I remembered that quite easily, because it had struck me at the time what a difficult pill it must be to swallow. It was one of those cachet things, rather large, like those Cachet Faivre things that people used to take for headaches a long time ago. My mother did. People may still, but I haven't seen anyone do so for years. I described it as such to the Superintendent.

"But you wouldn't say that this was a Cachet Faivre?" he said gently.

"No," I said, "but it was one of those sort that are done up in gelatine capsules or something."

"And did you notice her swallow it?" he asked.

I told him I hadn't noticed exactly, but I supposed that it must have been when she asked Pierre to give her a gin.

"And how long before she collapsed would that be?" he asked.

I could answer that one. In fact it appeared to me as if I'd noticed more than I thought I had. But I'd looked at my watch just then, and just before the royal flush I'd looked again, because I wondered how much longer Ambrose was going to be.

"Twenty minutes," I said, and explained how it was I was so sure.

He nodded and then asked me one or two questions about people's movements, obviously to see who could have put something in Lila's glass, or changed that pill or something, but I couldn't really tell him much about that, and somehow or other at the moment I quite forgot that Jan Faversham had stood up and walked all round the table, pausing at each person as if by chance or interest in their cards. I forgot it entirely. Ambrose said stuffily afterwards that it was Freudian forgetting. I wanted to forget because I had some silly upper-sixth notion of not being a sneak and girls sticking together and that sort of thing. But it was nonsense. I simply didn't even think of it.

And then the Superintendent said, "Thank you very much, Miss Brown, you have been most helpful," and I was led out of the room again with the most courtly politeness and back to the drawing room and Ambrose.

Edward Collingwood was the next to be invited into

the presence, and he strolled out looking quite calm; the others looked at him just as they had done at me, with apprehension and—yes—dislike, and I realised then that they were all together, even though they hated and mistrusted each other; but they *knew* each other and were linked in some way. Rather as if one fell they all fell, so they hung together. But Collingwood and I were outsiders and so we were dangerous.

It wasn't an awfully nice feeling when you realised that one of them had almost certainly poisoned Lila Orvini. I began to feel uneasy and scared and then Ambrose slipped his arm into mine and said, "I think you can go to bed now. Tomorrow is another day. Come along, I'll see you safely up to your room."

No one said a word as we went out of the room, but Ambrose bid them all goodnight in the most guileless manner.

"It's all right," he said when we got into the hall. "I fixed it with Hollow that you wouldn't be wanted any more tonight. And it's no good you looking as if you wanted to talk, you're tired and you're going to bed. I've got things to do. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

We walked slowly up the curving stairway and I noticed that one of the plug uglies was standing at the top, where he had a view of the entire big landing and the wide corridor that ran through the house. And once again, in spite of my tiredness and shock, I was reminded irresistibly of the Frog Footmen. He stood like a picture of them in Alice, and he had a wide frog's mouth.

As we passed him he almost bowed.

"Good night, Sir," he said in a husky, tough voice. "Mr Grogan said to tell Miss Brown not to worry, Sir, I shall be on duty here all night."

He had bulging eyes too!

But illogically and without any warning my feelings did a somersault and instead of feeling he was quite odious, I found myself thinking of him with warm appreciation.

When we got to my room Ambrose patted my arm like a kind uncle.

"Now don't get over-imaginative and scared," he said. "Nothing will happen to you."

"I am not scared," I said coldly. "I am horrified and shocked and I want to know a lot of things."

"So do I," said Ambrose pleasantly, "that's why I'm going down to the poker room again."

I was really tired and shocked and to my horror (because I can't bear to be silly in front of Ambrose) tears swam into my eyes.

"Oh, my poor duck," said Ambrose. "Shall I get the doctor to give you a nice sedative?"

"No thank you," I said hastily. "But I'd sleep much better if I knew just a little about everything. I'll keep on thinking. . . ."

Ambrose sighed, and then made a deep wrinkle between his eyebrows.

"Now listen," he said. "There's nothing to know yet, except what you know yourself. That Tintoretto's a fake. Grogan bought it through a friend of Lila Orvini. Duncan Carstairs is an artist, a very hard-up artist, who has no right to be playing poker for high stakes. Pierre Dumont is a gambler in every sense of the word. Jan Faversham, for a really talented and rather beautiful actress, is about as silly as they come in every way except her acting. I don't know who or what Cobden is. I think Grogan expected some sort of crisis or showdown, but not what happened. Collingwood's a dark horse, in that he seems to be exactly

what he is and to have no link-ups with any of these people except Grogan, but you never know with those serene, apparently unemotional types. Look out for my next installment and go to bed and think all that over, if you must think."

He looked at me affectionately, screwed up his angular face into a grimace and added, "What your fond father will say to me for getting you into this, I don't know. And now, goodnight."

"Goodnight," I said, and managed a shaky grin at him.

Then I went into my bedroom and found Rose there. Grogan kept up the pleasant, old fashioned habit of having real fires in bedrooms and she was just putting another log on as I came in.

I was frightfully glad to see her, she was so nice and wholesome and sympathetic as she got up from kneeling by the fire and smiled at me anxiously.

"I thought perhaps you'd like company, Miss," she said. "It's terrible, isn't it? And it doesn't look as if anyone will get much sleep tonight. Mr Cave says the police won't rest night or day till they've found out everything. They'll keep us all going and asking us questions."

Mr Cave was the butler.

I suddenly felt very grand and calm, almost superior.

"They won't keep people up all night, Rose," I said firmly. "They've let me come to bed, you see. But I'm awfully glad to see you all the same."

"I thought I'd make you some chocolate, Miss," said Rose eagerly. "I've got everything up here in the housemaid's pantry, and I can make it the continental way. Countess Orvini taught me, poor lady."

Tears of genuine regret for Countess Orvini sparkled in her eyes and I was a little astonished, because Lila had not

struck me as the kind of person who would endear herself to servants. And then it occurred to me that Rose might know quite a lot about Lila and Mark Cobden and the others, and that her angle might be very interesting.

"I'd love some chocolate," I told her. "Thanks very much, Rose. I'll get undressed while you make it, and if you made yourself some too, we could drink it together."

It seemed a bit sneaky to wheedle information out of Rose, who was so nice and simple, but then it occurred to me that probably Rose herself was a little bit curious as to what had happened in the poker room, and that I could perhaps tell her the bare facts. Everyone would know those anyway, and it couldn't do any harm.

"Oh ver, Miss, thank you," said Rose eagerly, and hurried off to make the chocolate.

When I woke up next morning I remembered everything at once. There was none of that hazy struggling back to recollection, and at the same time I had a sharp jab of apprehension which I couldn't quite explain. But it was very much there.

It wasn't because of any emotion about Lila's death. That was beastly and shocking. Nothing could be more shocking than to see a human being suffer that strangling pang and then be convulsed instantly into death. The actual happening was something I did not want to think about, but it was no good pretending that I felt any sorrow or emotion about Lila herself. I hadn't liked her when I first saw her and as the evening had passed I had disliked her more and more. I lay back and watched the sunlight shimmer through the curtains that stirred and billowed in a morning breeze, and I tried to explain to myself just why I had disliked her so much, because I thought that if I

could find out, it might in some way help to discover just why someone had killed her.

It wasn't just that she was a phoney, lovely little man-hunter. There were lots of those, and unless they hunted and caught your own man, you didn't bother about them much. She posed. So what? So did ninety per cent. of the human race. No, there had been something about her that was definitely wicked, and by wicked, I meant evil. All those four people, Cobden, Faversham, Carstairs and Dumont had been in some way afraid of her. Yes, that was it. She distilled fear into them. Perhaps less into Dumont than the others, because he was not as vulnerable as they. I had the odd conviction that Dumont was cold like a fish for all his charm, and that he calculated every word he said, and even every look he gave. He could not be hurt. At first I had thought he was in love with her and she with him; well, now I didn't know whether she was in love with him, but I was absolutely certain that he was not in love with her. I supposed suddenly that she had enjoyed seeing Jan Faversham racked with jealousy and love, and I thought too how stupid people like Lila were in their vanity and cruelty. It never seemed to occur to them that they might drive someone beyond sanity and get themselves murdered. I didn't want to think that it could be Jan Faversham and I thought about Pierre again. She had been attracted by him, I thought, but also she had some kind of hold over him. I reasoned it this way. Pierre was not the sort of man who would willingly allow himself to be pushed into an unpleasant and embarrassing situation; and so he wouldn't want to flaunt his affair with Lila in front of Jan Faversham. It wasn't a politic thing to do, and I was absolutely certain that Pierre would do the politic thing by choice and instinct. It would be no pleasure to him to see

Jan Faversham driven and wretched, and besides, whatever anyone might say, it's not really a very dignified position, a man between two women, and knowing he'd behaved badly to one of them.

And I didn't think that Pierre was the type to commit murder. His sins would be more subtle. . . . But probably Ambrose would pull all my beautiful reasoning to pieces.

I thought about Mark Cobden and Duncan Carstairs. I couldn't see why Mark should want to murder her, though what Edward Collingwood had said about him cheating at cards had been rather nasty. And Duncan I could imagine going berserk and shooting someone or strangling them—anything violent; but not poison.

Rose had said that Duncan Carstairs had a cottage and a studio about ten miles away and that Pierre Dumont was sharing it with him for the time being. She didn't like Pierre at all. She said he made her shiver just as snakes made her shiver, but she was sorry for Duncan. He was in love with Miss Faversham, she said, and hadn't any money, but she'd heard he really was a good artist and he'd been in the Navy during the war. She liked Mark Cobden and I gathered he *was* employed as a secretary-companion and that Grogan had brought him back when he returned from a business trip from France. But she didn't say anything at all about Grogan. Still, that wasn't surprising. What would have been surprising would have been if any one of Grogan's staff had known anything to say about him or would have dared to say it if they had.

And then suddenly I knew just what that stabbing apprehension was. Just how much had I said to Rose? I had the most horrible idea that I'd been indiscreet in some way. I tried, rather feverishly, to remember just what I had said, but there didn't seem to be anything; and yet still I

had that uneasy doubt. And it came to me suddenly that once when Ambrose had been talking about some murder case or other he said, "The thing is, one can't trust anyone at all. One mustn't. And let other people talk, never talk yourself." And there had I been babbling on like that idiotic brook, and getting sleepy while I did so. I might have said something, though I could not think what. . . .

The idea was so strong and so disturbing that I couldn't stay in bed any longer. I had to get up and do something. Rose had said she would bring morning tea at seven-thirty, and it was now seven o'clock. The only thing to do was to get up, bath and dress, and as soon as possible see Ambrose and find out what had happened and what he thought.

Though I didn't feel sure that I was going to confess to him about my apprehension. It wouldn't do any good, and he'd only be irritated and then proceed to push me out into the cold and refuse to tell me anything at all.

I pulled on my dressing gown and found my sponge and soap and started off to the bathroom. The frog footman was still on guard on the landing, and sunshine fell in pale golden rays through the windows, so that everything seemed tranquil and perfect. Nobody else appeared to be stirring but as I got to the bathroom Rose came out from a room at the end of the corridor, the room Mark Cobden had appeared from yesterday evening, and when she saw me she cried, "Oh, Miss Delia, I was just going to bring you your tea. I've just given Mr Cobden his."

She had started calling me Miss Delia last night, and I had rather liked it, it made me feel olde-worldly and all that. I still liked it, but I still felt apprehensive. However, I smiled nicely and said, "Thanks, Rose. I woke up early and couldn't sleep, but I'll only be about ten minutes in the bath and then I'd love it."

She came along to my side and murmured rather ghoulishly, "They took her away last night. I'm glad. I didn't like to feel she was in the house. And Mr Cave says that the police have decided to call in Scotland Yard."

I was rather surprised at that. Superintendent Hollow had seemed rather clever to me, but perhaps when there was a question of dealing with Henry Grogan, he'd felt that he'd just as soon throw the responsibility onto Scotland Yard.

"Oh," I said vaguely, "I suppose they would really."

I went into the bathroom and closed the door as I realised worriedly that now I should probably have to make another statement to a new Superintendent, and wondered whether I'd not remember properly and say something that didn't tally with what I'd told Hollow.

CHAPTER FIVE

I DON'T quite know what I expected to find when I got downstairs. Policemen at every corner, I suppose. But there wasn't a sign of a policeman; all the doors and windows were open and sunlight poured like a benison into the house.

Cave, looking solemn and bland, showed me into a room that had tall french windows opening onto a terrace, and on the terrace, looking very continental, were Ambrose and Edward Collingwood having breakfast. They both looked quite odiously placid. Ambrose was reading the *Manchester Guardian* and Collingwood, as I saw when he put down his paper and stood up politely to greet me, had been studying the financial column in the *Times*. Ambrose didn't stand up and I could have willingly hit him. He nodded kindly as if I was five years old and said, "Hullo, ducks, sit down and have a nice boiled egg. Newlaid." And returned to his perusal of the *Guardian*. Perusal was the only word for the way he looked at that paper.

Cave sent out a minion to ask whether I liked tea or coffee, and the man, who wore a white steward's jacket, brought with him the inevitable orange juice, just like all the rich households on the films, and according to the advice dished out in every woman's magazine. I can't stand orange juice first thing in the morning, and I'm jolly certain that a lot of females only take it because it's the thing to do; however I let him put it on the table and told him I liked tea for breakfast, and I expect that wasn't the right

thing either. Coffee is the smart breakfast beverage, I understand. I once met a girl who said very stuffily that when she was in the motor transport during the war, all the other girls had tea for breakfast—so suburban! Ambrose looked up from the paper and told the man I'd have two nice newlaid eggs.

"Thank you," I said bitterly when the man had gone, "but I am quite capable of saying what I want myself, and I never eat two eggs for breakfast."

"Only because the likes of us never have a chance of having two newlaid eggs for breakfast," said Ambrose. "Don't show off."

"Nerves," said Edward Collingwood thoughtfully, and looking in a concerned way at Ambrose, "take people in the most unexpected fashion."

Ambrose cocked an eye at him, grinned suddenly and said, "He's on your side, Delia, that was a very low blow at me."

"Well, I *am* suffering from nerves," I told him. "I'd enjoy this film star sort of breakfast in the ordinary way, but I just can't ignore everything the way you can. I hear they've sent for someone from Scotland Yard."

"Who told you?" asked Ambrose thoughtfully.

"Rose," I answered.

"Well, well, well!" said Ambrose. "And who told her, I wonder?"

"I expect everyone knows," I said.

"On the contrary," said Ambrose. "Grogan told me last night, but he said he hadn't told anyone else. He wanted it to be a surprise for some reason. Did you know, Collingwood?"

Collingwood shook his head. "I did not," he said, "but probably Cobden did. I'm told he's a confidential secretary."

"As a matter of fact," I said, "Rose had just come out of Mark Cobden's room when she told me. I was on my way to the bathroom and she came out and got a bit flurried because I hadn't had morning tea. And she told me then."

Then I remembered she had said that Cave had told her, and pointed this out to Ambrose, who was looking down his nose about Mark Cobden gossiping with housemaids.

"Why should Cave tell Rose and not the rest of the staff?" asked Collingwood thoughtfully. "And if he had been told in confidence by Grogan, I'm prepared to bet he wouldn't let it out to anyone."

"I couldn't agree more," said Ambrose. "It must have been Cobden. Delia darling, will you oblige me by not letting Cobden know that Rose told you about his indiscretion?"

I nodded and then my tea and newlaid eggs arrived. Somehow or other, I happened to eat both the eggs, though I hadn't meant to. Ambrose, for once, was tactful and didn't comment on it.

He seemed to have become quite buddies with Collingwood and didn't appear to mind discussing things in front of him.

"Jan Faversham collapsed after you'd gone," he told me, "and was put to bed with a sedative in the good old tradition. Carstairs and Dumont went back to Carstairs' studio. Grogan, I gather, always breakfasts in some sun parlour of his own, with Cobden in attendance. I should think we have about an hour's grace before the gentleman from the Yard arrives and wants to know everything all over again."

"Will we have to stay down here?" I asked. In one way I wanted to stay, but I knew that it was simply morbid

curiosity, which is not at all a nice thing, and so I fought against it and made myself believe I was desperately anxious to get away.

"Nothing would drag me away," said Ambrose, who has no nice feelings at all, as I well knew. "And you'll have to stay so that you can make notes of all the wise things I say and do."

"I wonder you can put up with him at all," said Collingwood, and smiled at me very nicely.

"Are you staying?" I asked him.

"Do stay!" said Ambrose hospitably, as if he was inviting the man for a nice visit in his own house.

"Yes, I'm staying," said Collingwood. "Grogan asked me to last night. I shall have to go up to town for an hour or two, but I'm coming back again."

"I think you'll find it interesting," said Ambrose, and quite suddenly he sounded grim. "Have you known Grogan long?"

Collingwood looked thoughtful. "I knew him well about twenty years ago," he said, "when he was a young man and extremely poor. I lost touch with him and ran into him again a year ago."

"Old college chums?" asked Ambrose casually.

Collingwood nodded. "Well, he was up at Cambridge on a scholarship," he explained. "Not in my college. . . ."

"Or in your set. I should imagine," said Ambrose.

"No," said Collingwood. "Our acquaintance was somewhat dramatic. He rescued me from drowning. After that I saw quite a lot of him. He was an interesting, awkward devil. Mad on chemistry!"

He looked steadily at Ambrose when he said that.

"It would probably have come out anyway," said Ambrose blandly.

"So I thought," said Collingwood. "But he's not a poisoner. Poisoning is a coward's method of murder. Poisoners are cowardly and cold-blooded and cunning. Grogan is none of these things."

"Has he got a private laboratory among other things in this mansion?" asked Ambrose.

"I've no idea," said Collingwood.

"Well, even if he had," said Ambrose, "it wouldn't prove anything, would it?"

"Shall we discuss it no further?" said Collingwood, and his plain pleasant face became rigid and unfriendly.

At that moment I knew quite definitely that I did want to get away. I could see plainly how beastly everything was going to be. Everything anyone said would be suspect. People would look for double meanings in the most casual remark. And, after all, someone among them was a murderer. And as Collingwood said—a cunning, cold-blooded murderer, a calculating murderer.

I couldn't stay on that pretty gay terrace that was so expensive and artificial, like something on the stage, and listen to Ambrose talking in that matter-of-fact way, as if murder was just an exercise in ingenuity, a good subject for debate.

I stood up abruptly. "I think I'll go for a walk," I said.

"If I may, I'll come with you," said Collingwood.

Ambrose picked up the *Manchester Guardian* again. "Do," he said cordially. "Enjoy yourselves."

We walked down the shallow curved stone steps of the terrace on to a wide path of green turf that ran between two herbaceous borders. All the flowers were white, and the description pleached alley came into my head. For that matter all kinds of odd and irrelevant thoughts slid about

in my mind, poker chips and the bleached fair hair of Pierre Dumont, Rose calling me Miss Delia and frog footmen. They jumbled about senselessly, and Collingwood walked by my side in complete silence. I wondered if all his thoughts were jumbled up too, but probably not. He had an orderly mind. He was altogether an orderly type of man.

At the end of the alley we came into an avenue of elms that ran through parkland where a herd of Jersey cattle grazed. There was shade under the elms and Collingwood said without warning, "Let's sit down. I'm not much of a walker."

I looked at him and saw that he looked dead tired. There were shadows under his eyes and small pouches, and he was quite white under the freckles.

When we sat down under a big tree I had the odd impression that his knees buckled under him and that he couldn't have walked another yard.

"Delia," he said, with a kind of passion, "this is a foul business."

I stared at him stupidly. For one thing he wasn't the kind who bounced into christian names at the second time of meeting, and for another he hadn't seemed the type to be deeply moved by anything. Very remote and detached he had appeared to me.

"I'm sorry," he said after a moment, "I should have said Miss Brown."

"Good gracious, don't worry about that," I told him. "I don't feel natural being called Miss Brown. Everyone calls me Delia. And I agree. It is foul."

"Murder most foul," he said under his breath. "That wretched woman. She caused misery when she was alive, and she's going to cause still more misery now she's dead."

Then he seemed to pull himself together and fished in his pocket and brought out a pipe.

"Murder never solves anything," he said.

I thought rather gloomily that for the murderess it solved everything quite conclusively. But I didn't say so. It didn't seem to help.

"And now," he went on, having found a pouch and beginning to ram tobacco into the pipe, "that young man of yours won't rest till he's hounded the wretched murderer down."

I stared at him. "Don't you want the murderer caught, then?" I asked. "After all, it *was* poison and you know what you said about poisoners."

I knew he'd packed the pipe much too hard, because my father smokes a pipe and I learnt how to fill it for him; but he didn't seem to notice, he just sat staring in front of him at the sunlit grass beyond the dappled shade, and his mouth was pulled down miserably at the corners.

"Yes," he said at last, "it was poison and that looks like premeditation. Yes."

But it was obvious that he still didn't want this particular poisoner caught, and I guessed that he must have a very good idea who it was, and knew that they'd been driven almost mad by Lila Orvini. Of course, if he thought Grogan had done it, and Grogan had once saved his life, you could understand how he felt about it. But somehow I couldn't see Grogan murdering anyone just to get rid of them. He wasn't the type who could be frightened or coerced. He was the kind who said 'Shoot and be damned!' and was confident all the time that they'd miss.

"Delia," he said at last, "I wish you could persuade your friend Merriman to pack it up and go back to London. Let the police do their own dirty work."

"I don't see why you should think Ambrose is cleverer than Scotland Yard," I said doubtfully.

He looked at me and once again gave that pleasant friendly smile.

"I don't," he said, "but I do think he'll have more opportunity to find out about us all, and I have a very great respect for his powers of observation and deduction."

He hesitated a few seconds and then added, "I suppose it would be quite out of order for me to ask you to let me know if he comes across any clues or information?"

I was frightfully sorry for him, because I knew he must be simply beside himself with fear and anxiety to ask such a thing. He was a person with integrity and he knew quite well that it would be disgustingly disloyal of me to do such a thing. I really was most frightfully sorry for him. I even wondered whether he'd done it himself, only somehow I didn't think so.

"I'm awfully sorry," I answered. "But you know I couldn't do that unless Ambrose agreed to it."

He took it quite resignedly. "I know," he said. "I shouldn't have suggested it. Only Lila Orvini was rank poison herself."

"Did you know her well?" I asked quite innocently.

But he gave a queer, tight little smile.

"No, my dear Delia," he said, "I'm not to be pumped, even by you. Anyone could see she was a poisonous woman."

"Well apparently not everyone did," I said rather tartly. "Some people seemed to find her fascinating."

He wasn't listening any more. He was looking past me towards the pleached alley, if that's what it was called, and there was Jan Faversham walking towards us. She was all in black and achieved a melancholy loveliness that cried

out for cypresses and weeping willows and a Rosetti atmosphere.

"Oh no," said Collingwood under his breath. "Oh no, my poor Jan, you're overdoing it. This is too much."

I agreed with him silently. It was too much. It was positively outrageous. Such mourning garments, such black parade of grief for someone she had loathed and detested.

Neither Collingwood nor I moved. He sat staring at her with a pale, almost fascinated horror and I didn't know what to do myself. It would look peculiar if I got up and walked away, so I just sat there like a dummy.

She walked slowly and gloomily towards us and stood still in front of us.

"Good morning, Miss Brown," she said in her lovely, sultry voice. "Good morning, Edward."

Her voice seemed to break the spell that had held him immobile there on the grass, and he scrambled awkwardly to his feet.

"For heaven's sake, Jan," he said, with the harsh irritation of nervous and concealed emotion, "what is the idea of this ridiculous mummer?"

A frightening glint of sheer, wretched malice came into her eyes.

"I am not mourning for Lila," she said, "but for her murderer. Don't you think that he deserves mourning?"

"Don't be a fool," said Collingwood loudly. "It's pure exhibitionism. Go back and change into something reasonable."

"But these garments are reasonable," she said. "Most reasonable."

He looked at her with an odd, tired pity.

"They are in infernally bad taste!" he said.

The anti-climax was like cold water thrown over her.

Her face crumpled out of its tragedienne's mask into young, frightened weeping.

"Oh, Edward," she gasped. "Oh, Edward. I'm frightened. I'm frightened. I don't know what to do."

It was time for me to go. I did so quite easily, and neither of them paid the least attention. I walked quickly back towards the terrace, trying not to run. I wanted to run because real, naked fright is very frightening in itself. But as I walked a most macabre idea came into my head. Why on earth had she brought those fantastic black garments with her for a visit to Grogan? They were weeds, widow's weeds, flowing and sombre, of the kind worn in Victorian days.

I knew I had to tell Ambrose about it. Perhaps he could find some explanation that wasn't as sombre and ugly as those black weeds themselves.

There was no sign of Ambrose on the terrace, but the *Manchester Guardian* still lay on the breakfast table. The white-jacketed waiter or whatever he was supposed to be was clearing away the remnants of our meal, and as I got to the top of the steps Grogan came out of one of the french windows.

In the bright sunshine his head shone like polished copper and his eyes were very blue and very clear. He showed no signs of anxiety or sleeplessness. He looked fit and competent and content.

"Hello," he said in a friendly tone. "Been out walking?"

"Yes," I said.

The waiter had disappeared and Grogan looked at me and frowned.

"Sleep badly?" he asked.

"Did you expect anyone to sleep well?" I retorted aggressively.

The aggression was sheer nerves and I expected an explosion from him, but he only looked troubled.

"I know," he said, "it's a shocking affair altogether Poor Lila. But she had no judgment, you know, about people. She always thought she could handle anything."

He looked past me and down towards the lovely avenue of elms.

"Good Lord," he said pensively, "what on earth does Jan Faversham think she's doing dressed like that? It's rather early to start building up for a verdict of Guilty but Insane."

"Oh, don't," I said shakily, "don't be so—so callous and facetious!"

And before he could answer I rushed into the house and up into my own bedroom.

CHAPTER SIX

ROSE was in my room when I got up there, and she gave me her charming, diffident smile. I smiled back but I felt my smile was rather fixed and mechanical. Somehow the feeling that I'd made a bit of an idiot of myself with her last night persisted. It didn't seem a reasonable sort of feeling, because she was a little country girl and it had been the most natural thing in the world that she wanted to talk about Lila, and had been half-excited, half-scared. But I couldn't remember exactly what I'd told her, and last night I suppose I was really a bit overwrought and out of control myself. And it's just at times like that, Ambrose says, that people make idiots of themselves and say things they don't mean to.

I went over to the dressing table and began to do my face, with an air of absorbed concentration that I hoped would make her think that I had serious matters on my mind and mustn't be interrupted. But it didn't work.

"Oh, Miss Delia," she said softly. "Isn't it terrible about Miss Faversham?"

"I haven't heard anything about Miss Faversham," I said, in what I hoped was a quelling and uninterested voice.

"Well, Miss Delia, one of the footmen saw her coming away from the chemistry laboratory yesterday about six o'clock. And no one is supposed to go in there except Mr Grogan himself, and, of course, Mr Cobden. But Mr Cobden never goes alone."

"Indeed?" I said. "I don't see that's anything very important."

And I thought complacently that not even Ambrose could find fault with that beautiful and negative remark.

"So there was a laboratory," I thought to myself. "Now that's very interesting. But just because Jan Faversham was seen coming away from it doesn't mean that she'd been *inside* it."

It was really very odd how, whenever Jan Faversham's name came up, something inside me rose up and started to champion her. It wasn't at all the way to behave in a case like this. One should be absolutely detached and calm, terrifically logical and reasoning. One should remember that in an investigation everyone was possibly guilty until proved innocent. Quite the opposite to the Old Bailey. I couldn't see why I should want to protect Jan Faversham. After all, I didn't know her at all and she hadn't been terribly nice or anything, in fact she'd been rather superior and snubbing almost. But then I could understand awfully well how it must feel to be desperately in love, how frantic it must be to love someone utterly and know they were being taken away by someone else; someone who really didn't care tuppence about them, but just did it out of greedy power complex. Because I was sure that that was what it had been with Lila. She simply had to grab everything, people and things, and make them belong to her and kow-tow to her. If they did probably she wouldn't bother much about them, but if they refused, if they eluded her, then she wouldn't rest until she had them. And somehow or other I couldn't imagine Pierre Dumont belonging to anyone else but himself, or being managed by anyone. So Lila would have been mad to subjugate him.

"I know, Miss Delia," said Rose in a subdued voice.

"But, you see, she was coming *out* of the door, and it ought to have been locked. Smithers, that's the footman, doesn't want to say anything about it to the police. He hated Countess Orvini and he admires Miss Faversham. But I say it's his duty to do so."

I got a very queer, funny little feeling at that remark. It was as if something with spidery legs ran up and down my spine. It was horrible. And, of course, silly. But it was as if Rose, so young and simple and pretty, *wanted* Jan Faversham to be hurt.

I looked round at her and saw her staring at me earnestly, with a worried pucker between her straight brown eyebrows, as if she wanted me to do something about it, as if she was willing me to do something.

"After all," I said doubtfully, "it's up to Smithers, isn't it? I mean, we really oughtn't to talk about it, it might do an awful lot of harm to someone quite innocent."

"Yes, Miss Delia," she said dubiously, and her lips puckered up as if she was going to cry. "But it's only right that whoever did such a wicked thing should be punished, isn't it?"

Somehow I didn't want to answer that question. I wasn't really quite sure in my own mind that I had the right answer to it. Somehow it wasn't at all simple to me. I knew the proper, conventional answer, of course. People who commit murder most certainly should be punished; and until now I'd have answered in the affirmative without any compunction at all. But that was before I'd met Lila Orvini, or been in actual contact with anything as frightening and horrible as murder. Now it was not so easy. Because suddenly all kinds of frightful abysses opened under you. You suddenly saw that perhaps quite ordinary good people might be so driven that they couldn't endure life any longer

so long as the tormentor was still alive. It was all wrong to feel like that. Nothing, nothing, nothing justified killing anyone. I didn't want to justify it, but I'd begun to understand it and I couldn't just be dogmatic about it any more.

"I expect so," I said weakly. "Anyway, Rose, the police will look after everything, and I don't think we need go out of our way to try and make up suspicions of people."

"But of course," said Rose, very wide-eyed and innocent, "if you're asked anything you must speak the truth, mustn't you?"

"Yes, you must do that," I said hurriedly, fished a handkerchief out of a drawer and pretended I was in a hurry to get somewhere.

I was really. I was in a hurry to find Ambrose and tell him all this, and about how funny it had made me feel. And how I was quite sure that Rose was determined to tell the man from Scotland Yard about Jan, no matter what the footman did. And that she was being savage about it under that clear young simplicity, because for some reason or other she hated Jan Faversham.

It was peculiar for anyone to hate Jan Faversham and like Countess Orvini, and Rose obviously did both those things. At least it was peculiar to me. Perhaps other people might think differently.

As I hurried across the big landing and down the shallow curving stairs, I thought suddenly how unexpected it was that one of the plug-uglies, the frog footmen, should have scruples of any kind. They didn't look as if either of them had any human feelings at all. But one of them must have.

I got into the hall, which was empty except for Cave, who was kind of wafting about the place, straightening out the glossy covered magazines that lay on a big chest

to one side of a door. When he heard me coming he straightened up and moved away, again with that wafting effect, as if he floated rather than walked.

"The officials from Scotland Yard have just arrived, Miss," he said solemnly.

He looked as if he'd been stuffed and the stuffing was trying to burst out, and I realised suddenly that under that solemn pomposity he was excited and apprehensive; moreover, I was pretty sure he'd been trying to listen, and that the officials, as he called them, must be in the room behind the door by the chest.

"Oh!" I said ineptly.

Cave shook his head gloomily.

"No good will come of this," he remarked, as if he was an oracle, sighed deeply and wafted away, presumably to his pantry or to the servants' hall.

It seemed to me a little unnecessary a prophecy. No one would expect any good to come of it. It was an idiotic thing to say, I thought angrily, and became aware that I was suffering from acute nervous irritation. As if I didn't know that people did say the most idiotic things when something awful was going on.

At that moment I wanted above all things to see Ambrose, and let him make everything seem a matter of the reason and not of the emotions. But instead I got Mark Cobden.

He came out of the door of the inquisition chamber, which was what I felt was the only suitable name for the room where the 'officials' were gathered together; and he was frowning heavily. When he saw me, his face slipped into its normal, charming insouciance.

"Hello, there," he said. "The gestapo are in full swing. They're queer guys. Kind of quiet. And polite! Oh boy,

you've no notion how polite those boys are. I expected to be razzed a bit, you know. But no. It's 'I wonder, Mr Cobden, if you would trouble yourself to remember this or that . . .' It gets you jittery. I could stand up to them if they got tough."

I said, without thinking, "Yes, if I'd got anything to hide, I'd be frantically jittery of Hollow."

Mark stared at me thoughtfully and then gave a twisted, little-boy grin.

"Was that a crack, sister?" he asked.

I went hot behind the ears.

"Good gracious, no," I said.

He grinned again.

"The wicked flee when no man pursueth," he quoted. "Maybe I'm one of the wicked. No, I haven't really got anything on my conscience. It's just that those guys are so darned nice to me that I get the idea that they'd hang a guy with just as much polite consideration, and it's a chilly kind of thought."

He glanced at his watch.

"Plenty early still," he said. "I guess this is a bit difficult for you. What were you thinking of doing just at this minute?"

"I was looking for Ambrose," I told him.

"You're unlucky," he told me back. "Ambrose is in there being brotherly with the gestapo. They just dote on him. So does Grogan. Funny. I don't see so much to him myself."

"Don't you?" I asked innocently.

I wondered whether he'd said that on purpose to see how I'd react, because he'd given me a sideways flicker of a glance as he said it. Well, I thought, it probably does rile him to have Ambrose sitting there and hearing everything

that goes on, and being quite happy because he didn't come under any kind of suspicion, whereas poor Mark Cobden did.

"No," he said abruptly. "Look, what do you think about our Jan coming out dressed like Lady Macbeth in mourning for Banquo?"

I didn't know what to think and said so. Myself, I was wearing a grey linen frock, and I'd taken off the cherry-coloured sash and used a black patent leather belt. It was the best I could do in the way of convention. I somehow didn't feel that the petunia coloured slacks would have been very suitable.

"Oh, well," he said abruptly. "I've got to go and do some work for Grogan. Goodbye for now."

"Goodbye," I said doubtfully.

If Ambrose was in there closeted with the police, I supposed the best thing for me to do was to go and find a book or something and wait until he came out. I wondered whether Edward Collingwood had persuaded Jan to change out of those fantastic clothes, and then it struck me that last night he hadn't seemed to know her at all, and this morning he'd spoken to her as if they'd been close friends for years. Odd.

The house was very quiet and it felt empty and full of air and sunshine. Somehow it didn't seem like a house in which someone had been killed by poison. There was no sense of regret, no one to mourn really. And that was rather awful. It almost made you wonder whether it had actually happened. But there was the police car in front of the house, and men from Scotland Yard inside that room. Quite suddenly that made it all worse. Nobody caring at all. Nothing upset or out of routine. Breakfast served expertly and as usual. Breakfast on the terrace had really been just

like breakfast at an hotel somewhere. Excellent service and impersonality.

I wondered where to go and wait, and decided to sit on the terrace under one of those striped mushrooms of umbrellas and pretend I was in the South of France having a holiday. I wandered out through the big lounge and through the open french windows. Beyond the terrace, in a huge clump in the shade from a tree, were some huge white lilies. Lilies. The sight of them gave me a quick pang, and once again the feeling in the poker room flooded in and made me feel rather sick. Just behind Lila, standing on a side table, had been an enormous jar of those lilies, and she had reached back for her gin so that for a second her head was framed by their raying blooms. Gin and Lilies. What a beastly, flippant thought. She'd died with the gin in her hand and there behind her, heavy-scented and funereal, the lilies.

"Ugh," I said, half-aloud, and hurried over and sat down.

The *Times* was still where Edward Collingwood had left it, and that gave me a funny kind of comfort. It was just a small human blur on the organised perfection. One of those trained and automaton-like servants had been sufficiently disturbed not to take it away and put it back with the other periodicals on the chest in the hall. I was glad to see it for another reason. I could read it. I hadn't got a book, and somehow I didn't want to go back into the house and look for one.

After I'd been sitting there, staring at the *Times* and pretending to read, and feeling lower and lower, rather as if all hope was being drained out of me; I began to think of Daddy and our house in South Kensington, and how

nice and safe and dull it was there; and how heartless Ambrose was, leaving me here like this so that I might even be in conversation with a murderer, and I felt small and useless, and funnily enough, a bit frightened. Why, I couldn't imagine, because after all no one could do anything to me when I was sitting under a striped sun shade in the middle of an empty terrace, where anyone might be looking out of one of any of the twenty or so windows that looked down on me. But it wasn't really a fear of anyone creeping up and stabbing me or anything. It was a feeling I got that whoever had murdered Lila was bad. Really bad. Not just someone who had been driven frantic, but someone quite calculating and cold-blooded who had simply decided that she must be got rid of. And that let Jan Faversham out. And, for that matter, Duncan too. Neither of them were like that. But I could easily cast Pierre Dumont for the rôle. Quite easily. Those pale blue eyes! Lots of murderers had those pale, china-blue eyes.

And then I nearly jumped out of my skin, because someone from behind me said, "Good morning, Miss Brown. How did you sleep?"

It was Duncan, of all people. I must have looked pretty deranged and scared, because he came forward, stared at me gloomily and said, "Sorry. Did I startle you? I'm wearing tennis shoes."

"You nearly frightened me out of my wits." I said huskily. "Please don't do it again!"

"Sorry," he repeated.

Without being invited he slumped down in the chair on the other side of the table and said morosely, "This is a rotten business. Who did it?"

"I haven't any idea," I told him.

He glowered at me, and for some unknown reason I

found myself being sorry for him, which was quite against my principles, and entirely against all my resolutions to be absolutely detached and intellectual.

"Nor have I," he said. "That's the devil of it. If I had the slightest clue I'd follow it up like a bloodhound. Look here, Miss Brown, I know I was boorish last night, but the fact is I was worried stiff. And now it's worse. Look here, I won't have Jan dragged into it, and bullied and asked questions, not simply in order to bolster up Merri-man's ego. . . ."

"Look here," I said tersely, "I'm not going to be bullied either. And no one can stop the police asking Miss Faver-sham questions. You know that. Even I do."

"Even you," he said bitterly. "Merriman's stooge playing the innocent."

Oddly enough, I was still sorry for him, and not a bit offended, though I ought to have been.

"Oh, don't talk drivels," I said crossly.

I mean, it was so *silly* of him to go round antagonising people like that, people who'd be quite willing to help him.

When I said that, he simply gawped at me.

"Why, you're only a kid," he said.

"I'm nineteen," I said coldly.

"Go on," he said, and unexpectedly his gloomy, Scotch face relaxed into the sort of grin with which brothers greet their younger sisters' snappy remarks. It shook me. I'd got all worked up to a Macbeth's Castle atmosphere, with Duncan being Macbeth, and gloom and witches and tragedy all brewed up together, and then he went and grinned at me like that.

Then suddenly he switched the grin off. Literally. It went off like a light, leaving his face dark and sad and hopeless.

"Jan's twenty-eight," he said, "and she's being railroaded to the Old Bailey."

There were all sorts of answers to that. I knew them all. In England nobody who is innocent has anything to fear. She only has to tell the truth. It's the same for all of us. But the last wasn't fair. It wasn't the same for Ambrose and me. It couldn't be.

I got rash, because I really was so terribly sorry for him. Last night I'd thought he looked quite old. About thirty-five, and heavy and boorish and conceited. But today, although of course he didn't look young, not even as young as Ambrose, who is thirty-one, he looked *somehow* young and defiant and—lost. I could see quite plainly that he wasn't frightened for himself, but only for Jan Faversham, and if he'd seen her this morning, then he had every reason to be.

"She couldn't have done it," I said.

And then wondered why on earth I'd said that. I hadn't meant to. I'd meant to be very subtle and calm and let him commit himself—the way they do in all the spy stories and detective yarns. Now I'd done what would make Ambrose absolutely livid. I'd committed *myself*.

His face became radiant and he looked about ten years younger, and not boorish or heavy or conceited; just unspeakably relieved.

"Thank you," he said fervently. "If Merriman thinks that, then she'll be all right."

That put me in the worst spot ever. I mean, if I told him it wasn't Ambrose's idea, but merely mine, then he'd simply sink again into hopeless, aggressive despair; but if I let him think it was Ambrose's idea, he'd just go about in a fool's paradise. I do congratulate myself that at the moment I didn't even feel resentful that my own opinion

was so obviously worse than nonsense to him. But it did seem a bit odd to me that he should think that Ambrose only had to think someone innocent and that fixed it.

"After all," I objected doubtfully, "Ambrose isn't infallible."

"Oh, you're quite right to say so," he assured me earnestly. "Naturally Merriman himself wouldn't want anyone to think he was infallible. But it's enough for me."

"Look here," I said, rather desperately. "Maybe I'm crazy or something. Ambrose is absolutely the top: when it comes to spotting fakes or . . ."

He winced so badly that I stopped with my mouth open. And then it came to me. The Tintoretto was a fake, and Duncan had faked it. It must be so. And naturally, poor cretin, he knew just how bad that would look on top of everything else.

". . . or judging stamps," I finished off lamely. "But why you should think he's Sherlock Holmes, I can't imagine."

He looked at me dubiously, and with a nasty, contemptuous sort of dislike that made me want to hit him.

"My God," he said. "What a little so-and-so you are, aren't you? Oh, all right, if that's the way you want to play it. . . ."

He got up and began to stumble away. It was the way he stumbled that shook me into action. He stumbled like someone who has been badly wounded . . . it was beastly.

I jumped up myself, bewildered and feeling every kind of pig, though I couldn't imagine what on earth I'd said to deserve all this.

"Duncan," I called. "Stop. Do listen. I don't know what on earth you mean."

He stopped and looked round at me angrily and

incredulously, but there were such deep lines cut into his face, from his nostrils to his mouth, and he looked so defeated, that I wanted to cry.

"Don't pretend," he said harshly. "You know as well as I do that Merriman's solved this sort of thing before."

"I don't," I shouted, positively shouted at him. "I don't know anything of the sort. Don't talk such rot."

He really stopped then. At first he'd only halted. Then he came slowly back.

"I believe you're speaking the truth so far as you know it," he said slowly.

"Of course I am," I said. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Surely you know he solved the Raddock killing. He's absolutely buddies with Kinshaw."

"I didn't," I assured him. "Truly I didn't."

I sat down again weakly. Now I could see why they'd all looked at me last night as if I'd been poison or worse.

Duncan sat down again.

"I believe you," he said heavily. "Yes. I do believe you. Well, then, it was your own idea that Jan didn't do it?"

I nodded. I was beyond speech.

"Well, that's nice of you," he said, and once again gave that nice boyish grin. "Delia, you called me Duncan just now. Can we keep to that?"

I nodded again.

"Then listen," he said. "Be on our side and give me a chance to talk to Merriman privately."

I thought that Ambrose would be all for that, and I still was quite sure Jan was innocent, and so was Duncan—of murder, that was.

"All right," I said. "I'll fix it, Duncan."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Now I had really done it, I thought guiltily. Nothing could be more stupid than to have promised to fix things so that Duncan could talk to Ambrose. Ambrose might quite easily refuse flatly. After all, who was I to take up the attitude that I could fix things with Ambrose. However, it was done now and the only thing was to try and 'fix' it.

After I'd made that hideous and ill-advised promise, Duncan relaxed somewhat. He pulled out a packet of Players and offered me one. I said, "No, thank you," feeling vaguely that by refusing to accept cigarettes and things I was still retaining a certain independence of action. And I had yet to find out what Ambrose would say when he heard that I'd been positively co-operating with a suspect.

"Might as well come clean," said Duncan after he'd lit his cigarette. "Merriman knows the filthy picture is a fake, of course?"

"I don't know," I said, untruthfully.

"It's a fake all right," said Duncan indifferently. "So he's bound to know it. If someone hadn't bumped off the Orvini at the psychological moment last night, Grogan would have been playing all hell with me and Dumont by now. Gyves upon the wrists and all that. That'll probably come later, by the way, when this Orvini business is over."

I said nothing. There really wasn't anything I could say that would have helped, and at that moment the white

jacketed bar-tender, slim and graceful and with his brown skin burnished in the sunlight, came towards us carrying a tray with tall glasses filled with long cool drinks.

"Good, isn't it?" said Duncan with a thin bitterness. "The great Grogan's domestic perfection mustn't be upset by a small thing like the murder of his girl friend."

"Was she his girl friend?" I asked curiously.

I couldn't see him with anything so mundane as a girl friend, and though it had been obvious that they understood each other terribly well, as people do who've been lovers and been linked together for years, yet somehow it didn't really merit the rather tiresome description of "girl friend".

"What are they?" said Duncan arrogantly and rudely to the Jamaican.

"John Collins, Sir," said the man in that soft, almost regretful voice.

I thought how fluid and strong were these gentle brown men who endured the arrogance of white men like Duncan. It was as if the Jamaican had some deep inner knowledge that enabled him to overlook the crudeness. There was nothing servile about his gentle acceptance, and suddenly I was angry and ashamed for Duncan, who must assert himself by such a stupid assumption of superiority.

"All right," said Duncan. "Not a bad idea of Grogan's."

I could have killed him for such a silly, pathetic attempt at patronage. As if Grogan had worried whether we had John Collins or not. All that had happened was that Grogan had created a passionless machine that was the perfect functioning of his house and background; and the machine went on functioning no matter what else happened.

I took a John Collins too and thanked the Jamaican, who smiled gently and impersonally and went off with his

tray, presumably in search of other members of the household who might need refreshment.

"I don't know," said Duncan, reverting back to our conversation. "She must have been, I should think."

He frowned heavily. "You see," he said abruptly. "Jan hated her. That's bound to come out. Jan," he hesitated, came to a decision and went on grimly, "Jan's infatuated with Pierre. Crazy, crackers. And there it is. I—well, you might as well know, I love Jan."

"I know," I said dreamily.

"Obvious as all that, is it?" he said bitterly. "Oh, well. I'm a sucker really. For Jan's sake I agreed to put Pierre up in my place. He was dead broke and she was going frantic about it. He wouldn't accept a loan from her. Damn clever act of his. No . . . he'd rather starve. Oh, we were both suckers. Jan and I. . . ."

He sank into gloomy retrospection, and I didn't prod him to continue, although I knew this was just what Ambrose wanted from me, reports about anything any of them said or did that was interesting. In one way I knew it was fair enough to listen, because if he was speaking the truth then it couldn't do any harm, and of course if he was telling a pack of lies on purpose then he deserved anything that came to him.

From where I sat I saw Ambrose and a tall, untidy-looking man in a tweed suit, followed by a smaller man, cross the lounge and go towards the end where a door led into the small hall and ante-room behind the card room. My heart gave an unpleasant little thump, and I saw Superintendent Hollow coming up the flight of stone steps to the terrace. He had taken off his hat and was mopping his high, narrow forehead with a bright blue handkerchief.

He was obviously going to pass our table, and as he did so, he stopped and said good morning.

I said good morning back politely, but Duncan merely glowered at him, and once again I thought what a tiresome, moody, stupid young man he was.

"It's a beautiful day," said Hollow placidly. "Good morning, Mr Carstairs. I looked in at your place on the way here and saw your friend Mr Dumont. It was just to tell you both Scotland Yard has been called in, and to suggest that maybe you would prefer to come up here to meet them, rather than have them crowding in on you down there."

"Yes, I'd rather see them here," said Duncan morosely. "Since one has to look at them at all."

Hollow affected to be unaware of the hostility and rudeness.

"Ah well," he said, still more placidly, "I doubt if they will offend your artistic susceptibilities all that much. Superintendent March is considered very paintable, so I have been told. Sir Winslowe Wicke did a portrait of him for the Royal Academy, if you remember."

He gave his small prim smile and walked away.

Duncan stared after him and then gave a grunt of a sour laugh.

"Confound him," he said.

I giggled. I couldn't help it. Hollow had been so beautifully bland.

"Oh hell," shouted Duncan suddenly.

I thought he was speaking to me, and was about to get annoyed when I saw that he was staring past me in the direction of the walled swimming pool; and there coming out from the arched opening was Jan Faversham, still wearing those frightful floating black weeds, and on either side of her Collingwood and Pierre Dumont.

"Has she gone raving mad?" Duncan demanded of me savagely.

"Don't ask me," I said hurriedly, and thought unhappily of Grogan's comment about preparing for a verdict of Guilty but Insane.

"For heaven's sake," said Duncan, "go and make her take them off. She must be crazy."

"She wouldn't take any notice of me," I said slowly. "She doesn't know me at all. She'd think it awful impertinence on my part to . . ."

"She likes you," he said impatiently and urgently. "She likes you. Please do it. Please. . . ."

I wondered anxiously whether Ambrose and Superintendent March were anywhere where they could see her as she came sailing towards us, the slight breeze ruffling her untidy hair and her head lifted dramatically. With the black draperies fluttering wildly she looked beautiful . . . but tragically out of place.

Beside her Pierre, with his corn-coloured head and his own dramatic arrogance, pointed the theatrical folly of the whole scene. In the bright sunshine he looked even more clear-cut and spuriously attractive. He was smiling slightly, one eyebrow raised, and he wore one of those shirts that aren't tucked in. It was of yellow silk and his slacks were dark grey linen. He walked beautifully, like a dancer, and as if he had nothing at all to worry about in the whole world.

Duncan stood watching them advance with his head lowered like a bull about to charge.

"I'll strangle him one day," he said thickly.

As they came up the stone steps Jan gave a little cry and ran towards him.

"Oh, Duncan," she said urgently. "Oh, Duncan. Stay

here with us. Don't go back to the studio. Stay here with me. I can't bear it if you don't."

"That's up to Grogan," said Duncan glumly.

He had taken the hands she held out to him and was holding them tightly and staring with an odd radiance into her huge dark eyes.

"I'll make him ask you," she said. "I'll make him. If only you'll stay with me."

"What about me?" asked Pierre negligently.

Jan took no notice except that her lashes fluttered wildly.

"I want Duncan with me," she muttered childishly. "I want Duncan."

"I wouldn't dream of it," said Duncan suddenly, and in an ordinary affectionate voice, "if you're going about dressed like that."

"I'll change, I'll change," she said. "I'll change at once."

"All right," said Duncan serenely. "Look, take Delia along with you. She's a tower of strength."

Jan looked at me rather blankly and then gave a small, anxious smile.

"Will you?" she asked. "Will you? I'd like it if you would. I haven't got a friend here."

I couldn't not go. I was so frightfully sorry for her and she looked hunted and scared like an animal. But I was getting in awfully deep. Everything was getting out of hand, and I wasn't being in the slightest the calm, impersonal observer.

I saw Edward Collingwood give me an understanding smile and a nod. Well, at least he could explain to Ambrose just how it happened that I seemed to be taking sides with what seemed likely to be suspect Number One. And in any case I had to go with her. I liked her too. I liked her very much. This morning, with all her tired poise gone and

hardly any make-up, she looked young and lost and—yes—and innocent.

"Of course I will," I told her.

Quite suddenly her whole face quivered and her mouth quirked up to one side. She looked down at her clothes and a look of shocked shame went like water over her eyes.

"I don't know why I did it," she said huskily. "I truly don't know."

Pierre gave a thin smile that showed a glimmer of very white teeth.

"It must have been your sense of the theatre, darling," he said.

Jan Faversham looked stricken, her shoulders hunched.

"No," she said. "No! It wasn't that. I don't know what it was."

Somehow I managed to manoeuvre so that I could catch her eye, and I smiled at her encouragingly.

"Let's go, shall we?" I said.

"Yes," she answered. "Yes, please. Let's go."

She held out her hand to me and her fingers were like ice. Holding it closely I walked away with her into the house. Behind us I heard Duncan say something in a fierce deep voice, but I couldn't hear what it was. What I did hear, though, was Dumont's clear, entirely amused laugh, and his remark, "Not at all, old boy, we all sink or swim together, don't we?"

Jan didn't appear to have heard. She walked very quickly and nervously, with her dark brows pulled together across the bridge of her nose, and she was obviously looking inward so tensely that her eyes squinted.

As we got out of the sun into the coolness of the lounge, where the green sunblinds turned the light into water, she said suddenly:

"Oh, my God! I must have been mad. Quite, quite mad! Oh, my God!"

And just then Ambrose and Superintendent March came into the lounge, followed by another man and Hollow.

Jan stared at them with frozen horror. Then she dragged her hand out of mine and screamed hoarsely, "Judas . . . Judas!" and ran out of the place back onto the terrace. I heard her babbling, "Duncan, Duntan . . . it was a trap. It was a trap."

"Well now, my little moppet," said Ambrose kindly. "You seem to have become rather involved."

I stood and glared at him. There were times when flippancy was absolutely disgusting; and this was one of them.

"I think," said the tall man in tweeds, "that it is a case of a doctor and a sedative myself."

"Better get hold of Cobden," said Ambrose thoughtfully. "He'll know the medi-o's number."

"I'll see to it, Sir," said the small, dark ferret of a man, and hurried out into the hall.

"Superintendent," said the tall man, "perhaps it might be a good thing if you went after the lady and saw that no harm came to her. Nor to the two gentlemen with her. I should like a word with them in a minute or two."

He turned to me as Hollow went off, and smiled. It was true that he was really attractive, as Hollow had said, very tall and loose-jointed. He had a thin brown face with sun wrinkles raying out from the corners of hazel coloured eyes.

"Don't look so alarmed," he said pleasantly. "She was obviously quite hysterical."

Ambrose nodded. He had been concentrating so hard that he also had achieved a slight squint. He came to the surface and shook his head at me sadly.

"That's a nice thing to be called," he observed. "By the way, this is Superintendent March from the Yard. This is Delia Brown, March."

March smiled at me reassuringly. "Don't get worried," he said, "but let's sit down somewhere and you can tell us what led up to that outburst."

"That's right, my little moppet," said Ambrose mournfully. "Sit down and tell all. You do seem to have been having a mix-up."

I wanted to make my most hideous clown's face at him. I knew perfectly well that he thought I'd been an idiot, and would now have to tell the police things that he would much rather have heard privately.

"It's all beastly," I said childishly. "And I want to go home."

"We'll see about that later," said Ambrose in his chilliest way. "It would probably be the best thing that could happen."

If Superintendent March had not been there I should have burst into tears. It was so hideously unfair. If he'd only troubled to be where I could find him after I'd left Edward Collingwood, none of this need have happened.

"Very well," I said with an equal chill.

I sat down and I did tell March everything . . . everything, that is, except what Duncan had said about the faked picture, and what Dumont had said about sinking or swimming together. I might tell Ambrose about that later, but I wasn't going to tell anyone else, and that was that.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"I suppose," said March thoughtfully, "that there is no one in this household, a solid elderly housekeeper or something, who could look after Miss Faversham?"

Ambrose shook his head.

"About the last thing you'd find, I imagine," he said. "Grogan, it seems, has no opinion of women when it comes to running a house. He considers them suitable as housemaids under the supervision of a kind of major domo. In this case, Cave. But in no other capacity."

March grunted.

"I thought the house had a funny feeling," he said. "Runs like a ship, if you get me. Precision and good service . . . not comfortable really."

Ambrose looked at him with surprised admiration.

"Never thought you went in for analysing atmospheres," he said.

March shrugged. "There's a lot to be deduced if you can get the feel of a place," he said. "If the atmosphere's all wrong, and the people fit in with it, then it's a fair chance they're all wrong too; then if you get one or two who don't fit . . . well, you can get an idea sometimes. However, when the doctor comes we'll see what happens. I'd like to think Miss Faversham was in charge of someone responsible. A nursing home might be a good thing. . . ."

The little dark men was coming back to us with Mark Cobden lounging at his heels.

"Manson's on his way," said Mark eagerly. "I reckon

Jan Faversham sure needs a psychiatrist, poor sweetie. Sure does. Lila put her through hell. . . ."

He stopped as if he realised he had been indiscreet, but March didn't appear to have noticed anything, and Ambrose smiled at him affectionately.

"If you've got a tame psychiatrist about," he suggested, "I'd get him in residence. Probably each one of us at one time or another in the next few days could do with his ministrations!"

"Sure, sure," said Mark with exaggerated eagerness, as if he was grateful to Ambrose for helping him out of an awkward moment.

The way he did it emphasised the whole thing, and I registered an intention to ask Ambrose later whether he thought Mark was really naïve or just plain malicious and crafty.

"You'll find Manson vurry obliging," Mark added, with his twang stronger than normal. "He's always anxious to do anything to oblige Grogan."

Nobody paid the slightest attention to that quite revolting, obvious insinuation. I suppose he meant that if it would help at all, and Grogan approved, Jan Faversham could be railroaded into a loony bin at a moment's notice.

"Thanks, Mr Cobden," said March politely.

He glanced through the open doors to the terrace as he spoke. Jan was sitting under one of the striped umbrellas and gesticulating dramatically, while Duncan stood nearby looking morose and baited. Dumont was sitting by Jan, leaning towards her and apparently talking steadily, while Edward Collingwood stood in the background, looking at them; not joining in at all. Superintendent Hollow stood there, looking idle and as if he had all the time in the world.

"Fletcher," said March suddenly, "go and tell Mr Dumont that I would like to see him. I'll be in the small room. You know."

"Dumont'll take some breaking open," said Mark brightly.

March turned a pensive, polite stare upon him.

"Indeed?" he said. "Well, thank you, Mr Cobden. When the doctor comes, perhaps you would be good enough to let me know."

"Oh . . . sure," said Mark in a disgruntled way.

The little man called Fletcher had hopped out of the window and was strolling towards the umbrella. Ambrose was sitting as if in a trance and March plainly expected Mark to go away, which he did sulkily, like a small boy banished from the consultations of the grown-ups.

When he had shut the door behind him, Ambrose said peacefully:

"It might be a good thing to ensure that a housemaid called Rose doesn't look after Miss Faversham. There's quite a good one who looks after my room. Janet's her name, and she lives up to it. Gaunt and dependable. Doesn't talk."

"I see," said March.

"Rose, Rose, Rose," said Ambrose. "Rosebud. But think of a worm. . . ."

"If I were you," said March, "I should start and think about Miss Brown! She's not pleased with you."

He gave the astounded and disgruntled Ambrose a gentle smile and strolled away.

Fletcher came back through the french windows, accompanied by Pierre Dumont, who gave Ambrose a cold, slightly contemptuous smile as he passed. Ambrose bowed gravely to him.

On the terrace Hollow now sat down by Jan. and

Edward Collingwood strolled off towards the swimming pool. Duncan still stood looking baited and morose.

"Delia," said Ambrose when we were alone again, "I must say that I do not approve of you having a private understanding with Scotland Yard."

"It's not I who have the understanding," I told him cheerfully. "It's Scotland Yard."

"Don't be pert," said Ambrose and grinned suddenly.

There was quite a silence.

"I want to know," I said at last.

Ambrose scowled slightly.

"So do I," he said. "I want to know a hell of a lot. There's a strong smell of brimstone about."

"Ambrose," I said suddenly. "Don't you like Rose?"

"I'm sure she is all that is of the most amiable," he said, "but I don't admire her taste. She has a yen for Cobden."

"Don't you like him?" I asked.

"Well, my dear moppet," said Ambrose coldly, "do you like people who cheat at cards?"

"No, of course I don't," I said. "But—but—I suppose Mr Collingwood is absolutely right about that?"

"Edward.C has a habit of being right," said Ambrose.

"He's an observant sort of bloke, you know. What's wrong with Edward C? I rather had the impression that you and he were becoming buddies!"

"There's nothing wrong really," I said, "only last night he seemed to be outside the party, just some kind of business friend of Grogan's, and he didn't seem to know anyone very well . . . then this morning when Jan Faver-sham came along doing that Mad Margaret act, he barged in and obviously knew her very well."

"He does know her pretty well," said Ambrose drily. "He was once married to her."

"What?" I nearly shouted.

"For the space of one year, Jan Faversham was Mrs Collingwood," said Ambrose. "And then she bolted with Derek Flower, the juvenile lead. At least he was a juvenile lead then. Collingwood divorced her at once. But for some reason she didn't marry Flower. That was about ten years ago. She was about nineteen at the time."

"Good gracious," I said. "But then . . . he . . ."

"Comes in unexpectedly as one of the favourites in the Suspect Stakes?" suggested Ambrose. "Yes, he does."

"If," he added in the most infuriating way, "you are deeply concerned to know whether his heart was broken, and does he still love her, I don't know the answer. Dark is the hum in heart, even that of an economist. You'd better get some woman's intuition to work on that. It has some bearing on the problem."

I suppose I must have looked puzzled or doubtful or something, because he added, "Think it over later. And, by the way, don't get in a to-do about Jan Faversham and that scene. It was probably a good thing. She's as near a complete mental breakdown now as she ever will be without toppling over the edge. I've an idea that March would like her isolated from her two boy-friends, and now it can be done."

I wished I could remember just who did give Lila that last gin. If I could remember that it would save such a horrible lot of tension and suspicion. Because it must have been done then. I began to say so to Ambrose, but he interrupted rudely.

"It's of no importance," he said flatly. "Don't bother your head about it."

I was just about to tell him what a conceited pig he was, when I saw a shadow on the paving of the terrace just

outside the french windows, and a moment later Edward Collingwood came in sight and stepped through them.

"Hullo," he said to Ambrose. "If the constabulary will allow it, I'm going up to London for a few hours. There's something important waiting up there."

"I'm sure they will," said Ambrose cheerfully. "But they'll probably put a tail on you, if you know what that means."

"They can," said Collingwood blandly.

He looked down at me. "I'm sorry about all that, Delia," he said. "But Jan's in a shocking state. Something ought to be done. . . ."

"It's being done," Ambrose assured him. "Doctor Manson has been sent for, and he'll have her safely tucked up in bed in no time."

I saw Collingwood give him a curious, hard stare that was not particularly friendly. But then, when Ambrose takes up that flippant attitude, anyone might be annoyed in the circumstances.

"With a police matron in attendance?" he asked sharply.

"Don't be an ass," said Ambrose. "You know as well as I do that if there was any question of police matrons, the girl'd be in a prison hospital."

"Well, I'll get along," said Collingwood, and stalked off.

"At any rate," I said to Ambrose, "I can tell you one thing. *He* didn't give her that drink."

"So what?" said Ambrose gloomily. "It wasn't the drink, you little goop. It was that outsize capsule that she took herself earlier on. Not a doubt of it."

"But . . ." I began.

I intended to say that even I knew that prussic acid or potassium of cyanide or whatever it was that smelt of almonds acted instantaneously.

"Delayed action," said Ambrose, still more gloomily. "Poison in gelatine capsule. Can't act till capsule dissolves. Someone switched capsule. Could have been done at any time during evening. She kept it in her bag and constantly left her bag lying about."

"But you'd have to be an expert," I said and then, remembering that Collingwood and Grogan both had played about with chemistry and that sort of thing, "Oh!"

"Yes indeed, Oh!" said Ambrose.

And then I remembered what Rose had said about Jan coming out of the laboratory, and Ambrose, watching my face, said, "Well, my ducklet, confess. What rang that particular bell for you?"

"Rose!" I said abruptly. "It's too beastly, Ambrose. I don't believe it."

"Well, tell me and see if I do," he encouraged me.

He got up and looked out of the french windows, and then sat down again.

"No cavesdroppers," he said. "Shoot!"

I said my piece and he made an odd, unhappy sort of face over it.

"Don't worry," he said at length. "It would have to come out in the end. But I rather think our dewy Rose has been near brimstone herself."

At that moment the door into the lounge opened, and Grogan himself came in, followed by a prosperous, genial man who carried a leather bag. Behind him was a woman in nurse's uniform.

I might have known, I thought with a curious resentment, that in this establishment everything would be laid on, even to the nurse in case of need. Tactless, I thought. It would probably send Jan Faversham into raging hysterics.

Ambrose must have thought the same, because he looked at the trio and his eyes narrowed slightly.

"Come on," he said to me. "There may be rather an unpleasant scene out there, let's go somewhere else. The bar, I think. I find that Jamaican restful."

I was only too glad. Grogan had taken them out by another window, and as they advanced across the terrace I saw Duncan come to life, and move forward in a menacing way. Jan, who had been sitting with her head sunk on her chest, looked up wildly, and then jumped from the chair and turned to run. Hollow caught her by the wrist and she screamed.

Duncan swung round and hit Hollow on the jaw, and the little man went down as if he had been pole-axed. Before I could register, Grogan went into action. He went across the terrace like a jet and his fist hit Duncan with a sound like a pistol shot.

"Run along to the bar, Delia," said Ambrose, "and order yourself a revive. I'll go out and help pick up the bodies."

I saw that Jan had been shocked into a kind of paralysis and was standing still and staring at Duncan, who lay flat on the paved terrace. The doctor and the nurse moved over to her quickly and smoothly, and Ambrose went out and through the dazzling sunlight towards Duncan. Grogan was already kneeling by Hollow.

Ambrose said over his shoulder:

"On your way, tap at the Inquisition Chamber and tell March he's needed on the terrace, will you?"

I nodded. I couldn't speak.

"Oh, and one other thing," he called. "Don't chat with Dumont. He's tabu. Stick to the weather or politics if he corners you."

I didn't want to talk to anyone at all. I went and tapped on the door by the chest, and it was opened by Ferret Face. I told him what had happened, and what Ambrose had said.

"Thank you, Miss, much obliged," he said briskly and shut the door again.

I started off to find my way to the bar, but I wasn't sure of it. In a passage I met a gaunt woman who was carrying an electric cleaner. It must be Janet, I thought, and I asked her.

She had a face that was all angular planes and that might have been carved out of granite; her eyes were a faded blue and unsmiling. But when she spoke, her voice was the soft, fluent music of the highlands.

"I'll show you, Miss," she said. "It's easy to get lost here."

Quite certainly I knew at that moment that I would have felt much happier, even safer, if she had been the maid in charge of my room, instead of Rose. Suddenly I didn't very much like Rose.

CHAPTER NINE

I GOT INTO the bar, where the Jamaican sat on a high stool behind the swelling curve of wood and was playing very softly on a guitar. As soon as he saw me he put it down and stood up. I was completely tongue-tied, not being accustomed to stroll into bars in private houses and order drinks.

Peter (I'd forgotten his name until that minute), stood up and looked helpful and expectant. He was most blissfully impersonal and just waiting to know what I wanted. He was part of the Machine. It was really astonishing that this real person should also have become part of the Machine. And yet it made things easier. I could order a drink and sit down and think, because he didn't project all the time the knowledge of Lila's murder. With him it was as if she had never existed, and yet he was not heartless. I knew that instinctively. And yet I was quite sure that she must have spent a lot of time in here . . . probably listening to the guitar. Or trying to flirt with him. But no one could really flirt with him. Not even Lila. He would present to her his pleasant, fluent manner, his gentle, understanding impersonality. But Lila wouldn't mind. Automatically she would continue to flirt.

"I think I'd like a John Collins," I said nervously.

"So near lunch, Mademoiselle?" he asked. "Why not have something short? I could make you a delightful cocktail."

Very probably, I thought crossly, it was quite disgust-

ingly provincial and ignorant to ask for a John Collins before lunch. Oh, very well. It was.

"Yes," I told him casually, "make me a beautiful cocktail, please."

Nice and quiet in the bar with only Peter mixing up little pourings from bottles into a frosted shaker, and the sunlight falling in bars through the big glass walls, with the open venetian blinds down.

I began to work things out in my head. Peter gave me a drink, very cloudy and pale in a small glass, and then he sat on his stool again.

"Go on playing your guitar," I said, rather grandly.

I wanted him to do that. It stopped the waiting silence in the bar, the silence that somehow or other you felt might be broken by Lila's husky, frivolous voice . . . shattered by the impact of Lila in her white towelling robe, with her tight pale curls and her immense vitality. Impossible . . . impossible to imagine her lying still and quiet forever.

"As you like, Mademoiselle," said Peter, and picked up the guitar. A flurry of clear notes tinkled into the air, very quick, very skilful and somehow, in spite of the flurry and speed, redolent of hot sunshine and a slow, deep rhythm of life.

I began to work things out from my own point of view. And after all that was the only way I could work them out. Something quite irrational nagged at my mind, saying that Jan Faversham couldn't possibly have done it. She wasn't like that. She was dreadfully neurotic and unhappy, but she couldn't do a thing like that. She might have tipped a pint of cold poison into Lila's drink in a moment of desperation, but she simply couldn't ever have thought it out, and done a deliberate, ghastly thing like finding out how to put poison into a capsule and then sitting all

through that poker game waiting for Lila to gasp and choke and die. She couldn't have done that. Not Jan Faversham. Not even if she was mad with love for Pierre Dumont, and knew that Lila was taking him away and was amused while she was doing it. Not even then.

But Pierre Dumont could have done such a thing. If he had had a motive. But what could be the motive of so reptilian a young man? Not love, or any emotion. Only a cold, thoughtful motive. Only something that meant profit to him, or else safety. If Lila had known something about him that was dangerous I was quite sure he would have killed her without a moment's compunction. But did she? She may have known about the fake Tintoretto. But then the moment it was known to be a fake, then Henry Grogan knew that Pierre Dumont had sold it to him. There simply wasn't any reason for Lila to be dangerous. On the contrary, she would herself be in the middle of trouble, because it was through her that Dumont and Duncan Carstairs had had the opportunity to sell the picture. Henry Grogan would never have believed that she was innocent. Not for a moment. So why kill her? Better to kill Ambrose before he could tell Grogan that the picture was a fake.

And Duncan, who might have hated her because of all that, was the last man in the world to know about gelatine capsules that took a long time to dissolve, or how to get hold of them, and how to insert poison into one. No! Duncan might be full of hate and misery and despair, but he would have strangled the woman, or bashed her on the head with a blunt instrument, or something like that. At least, that was the way I saw it.

And Jan?

I just didn't believe it of Jan. I believed that she was at the end of her tether. She was infatuated with Dumont,

and sunk in helpless misery and jealousy. And pretty crackers at that. As women are when they're quite blindly in love. But a woman who's crackers in that way goes berserk. She'll shoot someone, or push them in a river if the opportunity arises, or something like that. A person like Jan Faversham doesn't go in for a premeditated, jolly clever poison plan. Even if they have the facilities. All the same there was that tiresome story about Jan having been seen coming out of the laboratory. Suppose you were in that crackers state and the opportunity arose, like having unexpected access to a laboratory where gelatine capsules were to hand, and even potassium cyanide, might you go mad and fill a capsule with cyanide and pop it into your hand-bag, telling yourself that an occasion might arise when you could use it?

Ambrose would think that possible. And so would March. And Hollow. They all took a fearfully detached and practical view about murder.

All this time at the back of my mind had been Henry Grogan, Edward Collingwood and Pierre Dumont. Any of those three appealed to me as being capable of thinking out that way of getting rid of Lila. All of them rather unemotional and practical. Grogan, I was quite sure, would use any means quite calmly to further his own ends. Edward Collingwood, so quiet, so kind, so understanding, had nevertheless a cold, practical viewpoint of his own. He would kill vermin, simply because vermin were dangerous and unpleasant. He might easily consider Lila in that category. And if he retained a kindly feeling for Jan would easily consider it justifiable to remove the woman who was wantonly hurting her. While as for Dumont—if Lila or anyone else was in his way, he would not think twice before exterminating them. Always providing he could do

it safely. And he must believe that this was safe. Suspicion must fall so easily on other people. He had no apparent motive.

I didn't want it to any one of those, except Dumont. I would have been glad if it had been him. But not Henry Grogan or Edward Collingwood. It was *not* Duncan or Jan. I was determined about that.

The guitar tinkled on. The bar was still and warm and filled with bars of green and white light. I wondered where Ambrose was and began to wish he would come. I'd got things fairly clear in my mind.

But it was not Ambrose who arrived, but Superintendent Hollow. He came in rather apologetically, carrying his hat in one hand and mopping his brow with an enormous checked handkerchief with the other.

"Well now, young lady," he said. "You've chosen a good place to be in all this turmoil. You certainly have."

Peter put down the guitar, stood up and waited with that air of respectful, patient expectancy.

"A pint of cold beer," said Hollow blandly.

Peter, tranquil, neat-handed, poured out the beer and put the foaming tankard on the bar.

"Thanks, son," said Hollow. "It's hot today."

He took a great swallow of the beer, put down the tankard and looked at me pensively.

"So you had a bit of a difficulty with Miss Faversham," he observed. "Poor girl, she's in a bad state of nerves."

"I know," I said composedly.

I wasn't going to be lured into confidences by that approach, not even if I had any to give.

"Ah, well," said Hollow sympathetically. "She'll be all right now. Doctor Manson has given her an injection, and she's comfortably in bed, and won't be worrying about

anything until tomorrow morning. The nurse is staying on with her, so there's nothing to worry about."

"I'm glad," I said.

Peter picked up his guitar, made a ripple of mournful music, and said without warning:

"Countess Orvini made many enemies."

"Did she now?" asked Hollow with interest.

"Many," said Peter mildly. "She was very beautiful, and many men loved her, but she had no heart. Power she loved."

"Indeed," said Hollow casually. "And over whom did she have power?"

"Many people," said Peter. "She knew things about people. Foulish things often. Not important. But things that people would not like known. So silly things. Like having false teeth . . . or a toupee. She knew about these things. She would make little hints about them."

"Come now," said Hollow indulgently, as if he was rather simple, "you're not suggesting that anyone poisoned Countess Orvini because she knew they had false hair?"

"Sometimes," said Peter calmly, "people find a thing like that more shameful than . . . cheating at cards. Sometimes."

Hollow took another swallow at his beer.

"So you think someone here had false teeth and was extra sensitive about it, do you?" he asked.

"But also," said Peter serenely, "Countess Orvini knew other secrets about people. Bad ones."

He began to polish glasses that were already shining brilliantly.

"Such as?" said Hollow.

Peter shrugged indolently.

"How should I know what secrets? But there were such

secrets. Behind a bar, when people begin to drink, one can notice things. Glances. Little smiles and such things. When Countess Orvini had had some drinks she would look at people and they would not like it . . . but then she would crook a finger, and say 'Come, talk to me. About that little matter!' Some people, hating her so plainly, would go with her into a corner . . . and talk."

He put down the glass and picked up his guitar. His fingers ran a harsh scale up and down.

"But Miss Faversham," he said, "had no secret of her own. And she has no hate in her heart. Only love and fear . . . not for herself."

"For whom?" said Hollow quickly.

"You know that, Superintendent," said Peter gently. "For the man she loves. She fears for him."

"Very romantic and poetic," said Hollow politely.

Peter once again gave that indolent shrug.

"It is true," he said. "Since last night she has been mad with fear lest he had done it."

"Only since last night?" asked Hollow with unbelief.

"Yes," said Peter. "Only since last night. She thinks he did it for her. And she is wrong. Quite wrong. He would do nothing for anyone but himself."

"Dumont?" said Hollow casually.

"It is Dumont she loves," said Peter. "That is why she is afraid. I did not accuse Dumont."

"No, my lad," murmured Hollow. "All you did was to heave a great dollop of suspicion at him. That's all."

"But Dumont," said Peter innocently, "would not kill for anyone else's sake. Only for his own. That is where the poor lady is mistaken. She causes herself unnecessary pain."

"Indeed," said Hollow sceptically. "And what has

Dumont got on her that she believes he has killed to save her?"

"I did not suggest any such thing," protested Peter gently. "He has nothing on her, as you suggest. But I think Countess Orvini had something on him."

"And why should that make Miss Faversham think that he killed on her account?" asked Hollow sarcastically.

"Ladies," said Peter regretfully, "make illusions for themselves. If they love deeply, then they imagine their man to be all kinds of things that he is not. I cannot understand them."

"Nor can I," said Hollow acidly.

He finished his beer and climbed down from his stool.

"I suggest you tell all that to Scotland Yard," he remarked. "I am just a simple county police officer, and don't understand these subtleties."

He stumped out of the bar.

"He isn't at all simple really," I told Peter doubtfully.

"Why no, Miss Brown," said Peter and gave a dazzling smile. "I know that. Now he'll go hell for leather after any one in the world, but not after Miss Faversham. Miss Faversham didn't do it, Miss Brown."

"I think that too," I told him. "But I don't know why."

"Nor Mr Carstairs," he said firmly.

I thought of the way Duncan had spoken to him, and how much nicer he was than a lot of white people I knew.

"No, I agree with that too," I said. "But who did?"

"Don't you guess?" he asked in surprise.

"No. I'm muddled to death," I answered. "Do you guess?"

Before he could answer, the door opened and Henry Grogan marched in.

The barred sunlight fell on his red hair and gave him

a peculiar, Mephistophelian appearance. His face looked very white in that swimmy light.

"Hullo, Miss Brown," he said. "I've come to tell you that Merriman has had to go to town on a small job for me, and so you will have to put up with me for company until he returns."

"Oh, no," I exclaimed. "Oh, no!"

The thought of staying in this ghastly place without Ambrose was too appalling.

"I know," said Grogan sympathetically. "I know just how you feel. But I expect I can answer all your questions just as well as he can."

I suppose I looked pretty doubtful, for he grinned and said, "Perhaps better. I don't know you so well, so I can't be quite so rude as he can."

"How is Jan?" I asked impulsively.

His face became serious and concerned.

"She'll be all right," he said. "Not to worry, my dear. Jan's quite safe for the moment."

He looked at Peter.

"Double Scotch," he said curtly.

"Yes Sah," said Peter, becoming suddenly redolent of the Deep South.

CHAPTER TEN

GROGAN took his glass of whisky from Peter, but he didn't drink at once; he sat there and nursed it carefully, in the palm of his hand, while his eyes became thoughtful, half smiling as if he knew something that no one else did and that amused him—but grimly, not pleasantly.

After a few minutes he stopped smiling and looked straight at me.

"I don't want you to go away," he said slowly. "On the other hand, is it fair to ask you to stay?"

It was obvious that he didn't expect me to answer that question. He'd answer it himself in due course.

"Ambrose said to stay," I remarked after a time, because I found the waiting distinctly oppressive.

"Much as I admire Ambrose," said Grogan, and his voice sent a definite chill down my spine, it was so absolutely detached and bland, "it will not be his decision."

I felt very odd inside. He was the sort of man you didn't argue with—much. He gave you the impression that if you didn't do what he wanted, the results would be so very unpleasant that there wouldn't be much point to life afterwards. It was that steely sort of machine effect he had. Still, I had a lot of confidence in Ambrose, even if he did appear rather diffident and unimposing.

"All the same," I said firmly, "I shall do what Ambrose wants."

He laughed suddenly in quite a friendly way.

"I see I shall have to get Ambrose on my side," he said. "However, I think I'd like you to stay. You've got a funny little personality, you know. Stronger than I thought. Jan will need someone, you know. She's got a bad time ahead of her."

I didn't think I'd be much help to Jan after what had happened, but I didn't say anything. I'd already gathered that saying things to Henry Grogan was a waste of time.

But I did glance towards Peter, who was now polishing glasses with the air of a man creating a masterpiece.

Grogan managed to produce a smile out of the granite that comprised his face.

"Don't worry about him," he said. "He probably knows more than any of us what goes on in this house. People always imagine that a barman is deaf or mentally deficient and doesn't understand English. However, Peter is quite solidly discreet."

Peter continued to polish as if he had heard nothing at all, and anyway, by now I rather thought I liked him better than anyone else in the house. He gave me a safe feeling.

"Listen," said Grogan calmly. "Don't trust anyone. Not even me. Whoever killed poor Lila is a very unpleasant fellow indeed, and a very dangerous one. I can assure you of that. Therefore, no matter what you think or what you happen to see or hear, don't talk to anyone about it. Except to Ambrose. . . . Particularly not to Jan."

"What about the police?" I murmured.

"Oh, they're all right," he said, quite seriously. "So is Peter. If you must tell someone something or burst, and Ambrose isn't available, tell Peter. He's always here and a great safety valve."

Peter paid no attention whatsoever.

Grogan sighed deeply, a tired sigh that was infinitely touching, as if a Leviathan had suddenly been overcome by the world's sorrows and had sunk under the weight.

"That poor damned fool, Lila," he said.

"If she was blackmailing . . ." I began, when his whole face became dark with anger.

"Didn't I just tell you not to talk to anyone like that?" he said icily. "Telling what you know or guess. Not even to me. It's dangerous, you little idiot. Dangerous."

I got a very odd sensation then. As if something beastly crawled up my spine, and my mouth went dry. It was fright. Real fright. The kind I'd never known before. But, of course, something nagged in my mind, of course. Someone killed Lila because she *knew* something. And they'd kill anyone else who knew anything.

But before I could answer or even begin to sort out my confused thoughts, Grogan began talking again, but this time in a casual host-like manner.

"Those two young men, Carstairs and Dumont, are moving up to stay in the house," he said conversationally. "More convenient all round, really. They'll be on hand if March wants a quick word or anything. I'm afraid meals may be a little embarrassing. Carstairs is singularly bad at controlling his feelings and undoubtedly he doesn't like Dumont. Still, we must do what we can to avoid controversial subjects. . . . The police, of course, will be about a lot. But they won't feed with us!"

He gave a sudden, sardonic grin.

"Tintoretto, for instance! Should we discuss art, I think we had better leave him out of the conversation."

"Him and poisons," I agreed politely.

He looked at me and nodded without any expression at all in his clear blue eyes.

"Him and poison," he agreed, "and gin and lilies."

I stared at him and he shrugged slightly.

"A sinister combination, don't you think?" he asked.

"Lila insisted on both, you know. She adored lilies and gin, and she arranged for lilies to be in the card room. White lilies. Almost as if she had a premonition that those funeral flowers might be needed."

"But not for her funeral, Sah," said Peter gently.

"Indeed?" said Grogan in a hard voice. "For someone else's, by any chance?"

"I don't think so, Sah," said Peter. "I think Madame associated lilies with weddings, Sah."

"Did she now?" said Grogan pensively. "Did she really, Peter. You interest me."

Quite certainly at that moment I knew he was right, and that Lila had had a wedding in mind when she insisted on the lilies. And presumably her own wedding; she wouldn't have been interested in anyone else's. But who had she intended to marry? Not Pierre Dumont? He hadn't any money. He was an adventurer, and Lila was too much of an adventuress herself to do anything so silly as marry one of that ilk: She knew too well the risks and penniless intervals of that profession. Then who? Grogan? She wouldn't have hoped for that. Unless she was one of the biggest optimists in the world. Edward Collingwood? He would have been a good solid background, but he hadn't even liked her. Or had he? It seemed to me that Edward Collingwood was a good bit of a dark horse. It was all quite mad.

"And who was to be the happy man?" continued Grogan.

"I don't know, Sah," said Peter.

Grogan gave a short laugh.

"Look after Miss Brown, Peter," he said brusquely. "And you, Miss Brown, stay here till either Ambrose or I come to collect you. I've got some work to do."

He walked away with that silent, swift energy and, just after the door had closed behind him, Mark Cobden came in with Duncan Carstairs. They came from the garden through the open space where one of the big plate glass sheets had been slid back to let in the soft, hot summer air. Somehow I was surprised to see them together and apparently amicable. Duncan didn't appear to me to be the type to like Cobden, and as for Mark—last night he hadn't left any opening unused that gave him a chance to make small gibes at Duncan. But there they were, beaming like the brothers Biff and Boff.

"Hullo, Delia," said Mark affectionately. "Good place for you to be. Good place for us all to be, I guess. Let's all drink."

I didn't remember ever having encouraged him to adopt this very-old-pals-and-buddies attitude with me, and I didn't particularly want it to go on.

"I don't want a drink, Mr Cobden," I said snuffily.

"That's right, Delia," said Duncan cheerfully. "It's bad for young females to drink before lunch."

I had a strong conviction that they had both been having a few uplifting drinks in private somewhere. It wasn't natural for Duncan to be behaving like this.

"Now Delia," expostulated Mark Cobden reproachfully. "You're behaving just like the Gestapo. Refusing to drink with a suspect."

Duncan gave a snort of laughter. The remark appeared to strike him as being exquisitely witty.

"Suspect!" he said jovially. "Don't be a little idiot, Delia. Mark is no suspect. Far from it. He's on our side.

And he's got a pretty good line on the man who did it. It won't be long now."

Suddenly he looked at Peter and an expression of odious, smug superiority came over his face.

"Pas devant les domestiques!" he said in execrable French.

Mark laughed indulgently.

"Peter talks the classiest French," he said. "You were sure making a gaffe there, brother. And Peter's a wise guy. Knows more than most of us what gives. Peter, give us drinks. Your own special mixture."

"Yes, Sah," said Peter meekly.

I giggled, and Duncan looked at me suspiciously.

"It's nothing," I said hastily. "Just something I remembered."

But really it was the way Peter put on that Deep South act when Grogan or Mark spoke to him. It was as different as chalk from cheese from his real personality. There were no coal-black Mammies or piccanins in Peter's scheme of things.

"Peter," said Mark, with condescending familiarity. "Reckon you've got a pretty good idea who did this killing?"

"No Sah," said Peter gravely. "Who could have wished to kill the poor lady?"

"Plenty, Peter," said Mark, vaingloriously. "Plenty. The poor lady had a heart of flint, Peter. The tears of the afflicted, of the widows and orphans, were pure intoxicating hooch to her. But she came up against a tough guy, Peter. A tough guy."

"She came up against a dirty dog," said Duncan darkly. "A damn dirty dog. And that was where she made her mistake."

"The key of the lab, Peter," said Mark, with sudden solemnity. "You made a mucker there, Peter. A bad mucker."

His eyes were very bright and dancing, very amused, his lips curled up at each corner in an exaggerated way like the painted lips of a clown.

Peter had begun to mix a drink in the shaker. He paused for a split second, and then went on measuring with a steady hand.

"I don't know what you mean, Sah," he said politely.

"But March does," said Mark, and laughed loudly. "He knows and Hollow knows. And those two guys are pretty astute guys. Take it from me, Peter."

Duncan was much tighter than Mark. It was only too plain. His eyes were sunk in his head and had a dark glitter, and anger and hate were rising up in him. He jerked his head towards Peter like a morose bull.

"Damn nigger," he said.

Mark laughed again too loudly.

"You mustn't say things like that, brother," he whinnied. "Grogan wouldn't like it. No colour bar here, brother. Grogan doesn't like it. Does he, Peter?"

"No, Mr Cobden," said Peter, "and nor do I."

His dark skin had taken on the sallow grey colour that is the equivalent of going pale in white skins, and his gentle, long-shaped eyes were suddenly flat and shining, the whites yellowish.

"And you're surely correct, Peter," said Mark blandly. "It's not proper to call you a nigger. You're a Jamaican gentleman, that's what you are. And highly educated, highly educated. Grogan says so. That's why he lets you play round in the lab, isn't it, Peter? That's why, isn't it?"

Peter finished the last measure, put the lid on the shaker

and began to shake. He still looked that sallow grey colour, but his eyes had lost the flat look, and the whites had cleared.

He poured out two drinks and put them down on the counter.

Duncan leaned heavily on the bar, and hit it with his clenched fist.

"Oh no," he said thickly, "Oh no. Why no drink for Miss Brown? Why a separate drink for Miss Brown? Poison for two, but not for one! You don't get away with that, you so-and-so!"

"Peter," I said, "I'll have one of those cocktails after all. Please give me one out of the shaker."

"Oh no, Miss Brown," said Peter in a hoarse voice. "Oh no. It is not a drink for ladies."

He poured the rest of the contents of the shaker down the sink, picked up the two glasses on the bar and poured them away as well.

"Get out of my bar," he said to Mark and Duncan. "Get out. I will not serve you . . . get out."

"The guy's rattled," said Mark, and laughed again.

Before I could blink, Peter had a shining knife in his hand and had vaulted the bar. I jumped too. I jumped at Peter and clung to the arm whose hand held the knife, and at the same time I began to scream. I scream like fury when I want to. I can make Indian noises too, war whoops and things, and I did all of it, and all the time I clung to Peter's arm like a limpet. I hadn't time to say anything to him, I was screaming and whooping too much.

But I heard Mark say to Duncan, "You crazy guy, you've gone too fast. You crazy fool. Now there'll be all hell to pay. Let's get out of here. We can always say we got out to save trouble."

But Duncan wouldn't have it. He thought I was in danger or something and he tried to hurl himself at Peter. Cobden grabbed him wildly and pulled him out of the bar just as someone burst open the door and came running in.

It was one of the frog footmen, and he made a fearful gurgling noise in his throat and fell upon Peter like an avalanche. Peter went backwards and I went with him, and the frog footman, making worrying noises like a dog, knelt on him and began to throttle him.

It seemed as if now I'd got to stop the frog footman from murdering Peter, and I scrambled up and clutched the man's hair and tugged madly. And then the door opened again and Hollow and March came rushing in.

Between them they prised the frog footman off poor Peter, and Hollow said breathlessly, "Now really . . . what on earth. . . ." Then his eye fell on that sharp, gleaming knife that was still clutched in Peter's right hand and his face went cold and angry and dangerous.

March was holding the frog footman by the arm, but it was quite obvious that that one wasn't going to make any more fuss. After all, he'd been doing his duty, and now that the police were here his responsibility was ended. No one could blame the plug-ugly, no matter what he looked like. It was Peter who was going to be in severe trouble, and it was going to be horribly difficult to get him out of it. How on earth did you explain to a cold, shocked Hollow, and a grimly matter-of-fact March, that Peter had really been driven beyond control. Knives in England were absolutely barred. If it had been a revolver they might have been more understanding. Also, to my horror, I saw a ghastly conviction dawning in Hollow's eye that Peter had attacked *me*.

"It's not what you think," I said with agitation.

"'E was going for the young lady with a knife," said the frog footman glumly.

"Nothing of the sort," I snapped.

I had some wild idea of saying he was only showing me some kind of knife trick, when I remembered that if it had been that I wouldn't have been screeching like a Banshee and tangling with him in the best Wild West fashion.

"Mark Cobden came in and practically accused him of murdering Countess Orvini," I went on, "and Duncan Carstairs called him a nigger. And—well—he went a bit berserk."

Hollow looked definitely toffee-nosed. Plainly he didn't consider being accused of murder and at the same time being called a nigger was any sort of provocation to a man who was, in his estimation, a nigger. But March cocked a thoughtful eye at me and said, "That was a curious thing for Cobden to say."

"Cobden was drunk," I said stolidly. "And so was Duncan. They were pretty beastly."

Peter had got to his feet by now and was standing by the bar, very upright and looking bitter and flat-eyed. There was a graze across his cheek and a swelling on his jaw. He wasn't educated any longer, if you see what I mean. In his inmost self he'd repudiated all his so-called civilisation and was just a Jamaican native, full of resentment, not understanding anything and knowing that he wasn't likely to get any justice. There was a strange, almost grand acceptance about him. He wasn't going to fight any more. To hell with it. They wouldn't believe a word he said, and they'd think the worst just because he wasn't white. That attitude had been burnt right into his soul. But I was jolly sure he was going to fight. I was going to see to that.

"Where are these two men?" asked March thoughtfully.

"They ran away," I said.

March's grey eyebrows rose almost to the roots of his hair and the corners of his mouth went down.

"Ran away?" he asked. "Leaving you to—er—prevent this man attacking them?"

"That's exactly what they did," I told him firmly.

I didn't really know what Ambrose was going to say about this behaviour of mine, but I didn't care. Fair was fair however you looked at it. And truth was truth.

I saw a very odd look in March's eyes, a kind of kindling look, as if he saw something very interesting, which no one else had seen.

"Indeed," he said. "That seems a very peculiar thing for them to have done."

"It was," I said. "But that was Mark Cobden's idea. Not Duncan's. And the whole thing was simply disgusting and it wasn't Peter's fault at all."

March shrugged slightly.

Then he looked at Peter.

"You'd better go along with Superintendent Hollow," he said glumly. "And get that face of yours seen to."

He looked gloomily at Hollow.

"I'll be along soon," he said. "Would you see that his injuries are attended to and keep him till I have time to talk to him?"

Hollow nodded.

"Come along," he said to Peter.

Peter went with him docilely. The frog footman stood uneasily waiting for instructions.

March suddenly gave him a smile of piercing sweetness.

"That's all right," he said. "You did very well. I may want to talk to you later. Just now I shall stay here and talk to Miss Brown."

There was nothing I wanted less. I didn't want to talk to anyone but Ambrose, but I saw plainly that I'd got to tell March just what had really happened. And I hoped viciously that it would cause Mark Cobden plenty of embarrassment. Duncan, of course, had really caused the trouble; but he hadn't meant to. He'd just been jockeyed into it by Cobden.

The plug ugly retired, and March turned to me and smiled again. That smile was sheer murder. It made you go all weak inside and want to confide all your silliest secrets to him.

"You're a very prejudiced young woman," he said amiably. "I am inclined to agree with you that certain of us have the colour bar on our brains. I gather that Duncan Carstairs is such a one, and I can imagine that he was quite abominably offensive. Nevertheless, that doesn't justify knives being drawn. . . ."

"I know," I said unhappily. "But you weren't here. You have no idea. . . ."

"Perhaps I have more idea than you imagine," he said pleasantly. "Young Carstairs is like a stupid young bull. What I really want to know from you is what led up to it all. Who accused Peter of murdering Countess Orvini?"

"No one did actually," I told him. "It was just hints and insinuations."

"Better tell me," he encouraged. "Fairer all round, you know."

Well, of course, he was perfectly right, and if Ambrose chose to leave me alone in all this, then he couldn't blame me for doing what I thought best.

"I'll tell you exactly what happened," I said. "And what Mark Cobden said."

And I did. I remembered it absolutely clearly. Even if

it did seem to involve Peter, I had an idea that March wasn't prejudiced at all. Besides, if Peter had really done anything stupid about the key of the laboratory, then it was better that March and Hollow knew about it, than that Mark Cobden could go round making some kind of thing about it that wasn't true. It did seem to me that the key of the laboratory was awfully important. And I wondered whether Rose had managed to tell March about Jan Faversham yet.

"That's very interesting," said March, when I'd finished telling him. "Now I don't think I'm such an expert as Peter behind a bar, but I think I can pour out a brandy without difficulty, and a brandy would do you good after all this."

"You do see how Peter was provoked," I insisted unhappily.

"Provocation," he agreed seriously, "is an important justification. You needn't worry too much. Nothing will happen to Peter so long as he doesn't do anything silly."

"I don't like Mark Cobden," I said suddenly.

March sighed.

"I'm afraid likes and dislikes don't come into it," he said. "What we want is facts. But let me give you some advice. Don't talk to any of these people. Let them talk."

I didn't say anything, but I did really begin to think that Grogan and March and Ambrose were like a gramophone playing the same record over and over again.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I THOUGHT afterwards, when I was talking to Ambrose that evening, how March hadn't seemed to notice much the way Mark Cobden and Duncan had faded when the trouble started. You'd have thought that Duncan at least would have come back, full of indignation, to talk about his part in it. But he'd stayed away too.

"It wasn't like him," I pointed out.

Thank goodness we were away from the Grogan residence, in a quiet little pub by a trout stream. We were sitting in the garden and it was very midgy and the evening was a deep gauzy blue, and some distance away there was a weir or something that made a pouring, plashing roar. Ambrose had driven me there and he was drinking beer and I was drinking shandy, and it was heavenly. Much nicer than being in that super-super bar of Henry Grogan's.

"He was probably too ashamed of himself," said Ambrose lazily. "Scared too, perhaps."

"Scared what of?" I asked.

Ambrose made a pained sound and gazed at the sky as if mutely entreating solace.

"What grammar," he sighed.

"I do it on purpose," I explained patiently. "It's more expressive of what I feel than pedantic English."

"I see," said Ambrose glumly. "It says very little for your real feelings, but never mind. Carstairs is scared all the time. He's scared of the truth. . . ."

"Does he *know* who did the murder?" I asked with interest.

"He does not," said Ambrose complacently.

"Do you?" I asked sarcastically.

"Yes," said Ambrose, still more complacently.

"Who?" I demanded with excitement.

"Now is not the time to reveal it," he answered smugly.

"You must wait a little until I am able to say haughtily, like a newspaper correspondent . . . 'It can now be revealed. . . .'"

"I don't believe you've any more idea than I have," I said sceptically.

"Continue to believe that if it gives you any satisfaction," he said sweetly. "I was explaining to you that Carstairs is scared . . . he is horribly afraid to know the truth, because he's scared it might be Jan Faversham. He's scared stiff also about what Grogan will do about that faked Old Master, once this beastly murder is solved. And above all he's scared of himself, scared of his own violence and his own hatred. He's quite a nice lad, really, you know. But he's been mucked about a lot. Nerves all to pieces, sick with jealousy and anxiety. . . . I think he would have liked to believe that Peter had poisoned Lila. It would have given him an 'out'. He could have managed to regard the murder as something understandable, a thing done by a coloured man. A subhuman crime for which no one was to blame. As it is he doesn't know what horrible motives and causes may come to light if it is someone else . . . something he has done may have contributed to it."

I could easily understand all that. Specially if he was afraid Jan had done it. He wasn't very stable at any time. I wondered why he'd had anything to do with faking that picture. It didn't seem like him. It didn't seem to me that

he was sufficiently interested in money to do that sort of thing.

I said so to Ambrose.

"He's not interested in money himself," said Ambrose, and sighed. "But Jan Faversham was. She needed money badly. He'd do anything to get it for her."

"But . . . she must make a lot of money," I pointed out. "She's terrifically successful."

"You can never have enough money to satisfy a blackmailer," said Ambrose mildly. "The unquenchable maw of Hell is no worse than the unquenchable maw of a blackmailer."

An ugly little horror caught at me. Ever since I'd been old enough to read I had had a kind of shuddery fear of that species, the octopus. And at some time or other I had identified octopuses or octopi or whatever the plural is, with blackmailers. I don't know why. . . .

"Who was blackmailing?" I asked.

"As if you didn't know," said Ambrose. "Lila, of course. Still, if you can put over that dumb act with other people, please do. It's your best plan."

"But *what* could she blackmail Jan about?" I asked worriedly. "I can't imagine Jan doing anything worth blackmailing for. I mean, she seems to me to be temperamental, but nice really."

"Easier to blackmail nice people than nasty ones," said Ambrose. "Nice people feel shame over the merest peccadillo, and so they magnify anything foolish they may have done into something positively awful. They can't endure that their friends should know that once they picked up a parcel of nylons in wartime, for instance, and gave way to temptation instead of taking it back to the counter to be given to its rightful owner. They'd go through agonies if

someone started to blackmail them about it, and probably pay through the nose rather than have their friends or husbands or boy friends know about such a scruffy, mean little sin."

"Did Jan do that?" I asked with deep interest.

I'd often asked myself during the rationing what I should do if something like that happened to me and whether I should be honourable enough to take them back, or whether I'd rationalise or something and tell myself that anyone so criminally careless deserved to lose them. It so happens that I never had the opportunity to find out what I'd do, so I still am not sure. I *think* I'd take them back.

"Idiot child," said Ambrose peacefully. "How do I know? I'm merely explaining something. But she was being blackmailed all right. I'll find out sooner or later. Duncan knew about it . . . and that was why he had to be pushed into a position where he too was blackmailable, not for money this time, but for silence and inaction. That's why he was manoeuvred into the Tintoretto business. The threat there would be that if he took any action of any kind, then there would be some evidence left about his part in the fraud. As there was. . . ."

"She was a horrible woman," I said after an interval. "Lila, I mean."

"She certainly was," said Ambrose. "She certainly was. That's the way she lived. . . . I think she had something on everyone in the house."

"On Henry Grogan?" I asked doubtfully.

Somehow I couldn't imagine Grogan submitting to blackmail. . . .

"No," said Ambrose. "I'm pretty sure of that. He was quite shocked when the police unearthed evidence of her activities. Genuinely shocked. Besides, our Henry is too

tough for nonsense like that. He'd have a very quick way with blackmailers. And she hadn't anything on Peter the Jamaican, either. That's pretty certain."

"Edward Collingwood?" I asked, still more doubtfully. Ambrose became his most infuriating and pompous.

"The private lives of eminent economists," he said, "are something the most intelligent man would hesitate to express an opinion on."

Which meant quite simply that he knew something, but wasn't going to tell me.

"It is very ungrammatical," I said coldly, "to end a sentence with a preposition."

"I shall have another pint," said Ambrose equably. "And you can have a shandy, and then we will go back."

He picked up the glasses and wandered off towards the bar, from the door of which a bright oblong of light fell on the rough grass, and where men's slow country voices sounded like a deep regular buzzing.

When he came back, I asked, "And what about Dumont?"

"What about him?" said Ambrose. "He's not blackmailable. He has no shame, no position and nothing to lose, but he would murder for any reason at all or none."

"Then you think it was him?" I demanded, too eagerly.

I would have liked it to be Pierre Dumont. Just as Duncan Carstairs would have found it infinitely comforting for the murderer to be poor Peter the Jamaican, because he could contemplate Peter being hanged without a qualm, so could I contemplate Pierre's hanging without any regret at all. Not nice of me, I know. But there it was.

"I don't think anything about him," said Ambrose in his most snubbing tone. "He's a cheap crook and I don't like him, but that doesn't say he's a murderer. I can't see

any motive for him at all. Haven't you missed someone out in your list of possible suspects?"

"Who?" I said vaguely.

No one else occurred to me, oddly enough.

"Mr Cobden," said Ambrose, "Rose, Janet, two plug uglies and Cave and whatever kitchen staff there are."

I didn't pay any attention to that nonsense about the staff, except perhaps about Rose, who somehow now seemed to me to be a sinister little person. But, of course, Mark Cobden! Why on earth had I completely left him out?

"Mark Cobden?" I said dubiously. "No one would want to murder someone because she knew you'd cheated at cards. I mean, it's not important enough. And I don't believe Mark Cobden would care much even if people knew. . . . He's kind of too casual. . . . He'd somehow or other turn it into a joke or something. . . ."

Ambrose was silent for about three whole minutes, then he drained his pint and said abruptly, "You could be right about that. He strikes me as being the jackdaw type more than anything. . . . Still, as I told you before, you can't afford to leave anyone out until you've absolutely eliminated them, made sure they had no opportunity, no motive, in fact, *proved* them innocent. *Someone* filled a capsule with cyanide of potassium and switched it for one of Lila's own. There's a laboratory here. There's cyanide of potassium in that laboratory and there seems to have been a certain amount of carelessness about the key. It was left hanging in a cupboard outside the door, so that either Grogan or anyone else could just hop in and out. Including Cave, who has a working knowledge of chemistry and who frequently was left to keep an eye on some pot of broth or something that was simmering in a retort or whatnot."

"And Rose said that the footman saw Jan coming away from the lab," I said unhappily.

"He might have seen any of them doing that," said Ambrose cheerfully. "It appears that the lab contains all kinds of useful remedies, from quinine, aspirin and aperients, to less innocent things like pheno barbitone and benzedrine. They all knew it and Grogan apparently didn't mind them hopping in and out and helping themselves. It seems it never occurred to him that anyone would wish to fix up a dose of cold poison."

I stared at him through the blue gauzy evening.

"But how awful of him," I said.

Ambrose appeared to shrug.

"Grogan's parties were not for the kindergarten," he said calmly. "They were usually a pretty sophisticated and tough lot, who needed that sort of thing to keep them fizzing. What interests me, my little moppet, is why Grogan collected just this very unsuitable mixture for this weekend. He could have found out about the Tintoretto without having the fakers on the spot, without dragging poor Jan Faversham in to agonise. . . . That's what I want to know."

"Perhaps," I suggested, "he's just plain sadistic and wanted to see them squirm."

"Nope," said Ambrose. "You can count that out. He's not like that. Too passionless. Never does anything without a logical motive. But, of course, he won't let on now, in these circumstances. Still, I'd like to know. He must have expected some development that was important to him, but he didn't expect murder. I'll swear to that. Though March doesn't agree with me."

He stood up.

"Come along, moppet," he said. "Tomorrow I want you

to see Jan Faversham and make it up with her. Grogan will see to it that her suspicions have been completely dissipated. And listen, ducky, none of her boy friends must get anywhere near her. Not Pierre nor Duncan, Edward Collingwood or Mark Cobden. That's important. You and the nurse and Janet can see to it between you. It's very important."

He took my hand as we walked through the short rough grass past the pub and into the road where Ambrose's car was. He held it very tight and comfortingly, and just before he started the engine, he said in the nicest possible way, "Delia, darling, I'm rather fond of you, and I wouldn't like anything to happen to you. You can trust the plug uglies, and Janet. No one else except me, March and Hollow. Oh yes, and Grogan. He'd hate anything to happen to you. And for the rest, kindly do exactly what I tell you and don't try and think for yourself."

"I suppose," I said rather shakily, "this is your idea of helping me to have a nice comfortable night."

"You'll be all right," he said in an encouraging tone. "Plug Ugly Number One is on guard on your landing tonight."

He pressed the starter and the engine bumbled into life.

"Ambrose," I said earnestly when we got half-way up the drive, "I'm a bit scared really. If you'd only tell me something definite."

"There isn't anything definite, moppet," he said, very seriously. "I wish there was. Just listen and don't talk. I'm rather fond of you really, and I'll be keeping an eye on you. But I want an eye kept on Jan Faversham and you're the one to do it for me."

It is really quite absurd the way Ambrose can get round me and make me feel frightfully proud that I'm allowed to

do anything for him. I find myself jabbering grateful thanks when he tells me I can do some rotten job, and even thinking it perfectly reasonable that he allows me to risk being seriously damaged physically so long as he can get on with whatever job he's doing. I must be a little dotty, perhaps. Anyway, as we drove along I found myself feeling uplifted and heroic . . . like Joan of Arc and Grace Darling, and people like that. I was going to keep my eye glued onto Jan Faversham no matter what happened, and ward off Duncan and Pierre and—yes—and Edward Collingwood, especially Edward Collingwood. It wasn't really a good thing for him to be mixed up with this kind of affair.

CHAPTER TWELVE

IN SPITE of everything, I fell asleep almost as soon as I got into bed. There had been nobody about when we got back except Edward Collingwood, who came out of a room carrying a lot of papers in one hand, and who looked tired and white, and merely nodded to us as he passed.

A plug ugly stood on the landing and shook me by smiling politely as we came up the stairs. It shows what a horrible state of nerves I was in that I started to giggle as soon as I got inside my room and couldn't stop for about five minutes. Ambrose stayed with me until I stopped. He remarked that he couldn't see anything to giggle about, and he considered the plug ugly had a very kind smile which showed he possessed a heart of gold.

I only stopped out of sheer exhaustion, and Ambrose patted my shoulder kindly and told me not to worry, he was quite sure the place was stiff with policemen, all concealed in Grogan's suits of armour, and that I would have to attend the inquest in the morning, and that he would tell me exactly what to say to the coroner.

"Don't I tell him the truth?" I asked amiably.

"Don't be facetious, my moppet," he said coldly. "There is a certain restraint to be exercised with coroners. But, if it's of any interest to you, Lila Orvini was born in the Old Kent Road, her first husband was a plumber and she ran away from him with a handsome foreigner. Ever since then she has called herself Countess Orvini. . . . Grogan knew her when she was little Lily Jackson and used to dance to

barrel organs on the pavement. . . . Grogan also was born in the Old Kent Road."

He added, rather morosely, "Grogan is inclined to have a soft spot for people who've fought their way up in the world by tooth and claw . . . he did himself. He's a queer type. He didn't like her, but he thought she had guts. . . . For some reason he never spotted her blackmailing activities. Must have worn blinkers."

And as he got to the door he paused with his hand on the handle. Then he grinned wearily.

"To be continued in our next, Delia, my dear. And now, goodnight. But just one thing. The Orvini was in love, or rather, she had a yen for someone, try and work out who it might have been. It's rather important."

"Dumont," I said confidently.

Ambrose shook his head. "No. Too obvious," he argued. "She was in cahoots with Dumont . . . a purely business partnership. No, it was someone else. And it was not reciprocated."

"Grogan," I suggested.

"Could be," said Ambrose vaguely. "Or the Jamaican. There's something very elusive about that one, which could easily drive a woman like the Orvini a bit potty. It would infuriate her not to be able to make any impression on him. It would infuriate her so much that she might easily get into an emotional state that she would call love to herself. Think it over . . . and sleep well."

"I can't do both at once," I retorted.

I thought that Ambrose himself might easily come into the same category as Peter. He was elusive and you never could be sure that you'd made any kind of impression on him. And though he was so pale and diffident and mild-mannered, I used to notice that all kinds of females fell for

him, at any rate, they took a lot of trouble over him, just as Lila had.

"All right," said Ambrose with an air of calm reason, "think first and sleep afterwards, or *vice versa*."

He gave his sleepest and most charming smile, opened the door and strolled away.

"Much sleep I'm going to get," I told myself crossly. But the moment I got into bed and settled down to think things out, my eyes closed against my will, and I fell asleep.

I dreamed a bit. Uncomfortable, violent dreams, very confused and somehow noisy. I ran down corridors in my dream, and doors banged and I was frightened. I knew it was a dream and tried to wake up, but couldn't. That sort of dream. And finally I really did struggle back to being awake and the knocking was still going on. It was someone knocking at my door.

If it had been a stealthy knocking I wouldn't have taken any notice. I'd have put my head under the bedclothes and stayed still, scared stiff. But it was an official knocking, brisk and candid. Let all the world hear this knocking . . . this knocking is important and innocent. So I got out of bed, pulled on a dressing gown and went to the door.

"What is it?" I asked, in what I hoped was an indignant and impressive voice.

"Open up," said Ambrose's voice, beautifully languid and casual.

I opened the door and Ambrose came in, followed by Henry Grogan. They were both in pyjamas and dressing gowns. Ambrose's gown was really rather absurd, a full-skirted affair like they used to wear in the Regency days, of plum-coloured silk, and Grogan's was of awful utility winceyette or something. His pyjamas were flannel and pink striped, and clashed violently with his flaming hair.

"That's all right," said Ambrose to Grogan, as if I didn't exist. "She was only asleep . . . not lying in a drugged stupor or anything dramatic."

"Well, she didn't need to, did she?" said Grogan acidly. "A pillow held firmly over her face would be all that was necessary."

"I think this is a charming conversation," I said with dignity. "But it would be better if you just told me in simple, plain words why you have to waken me up like this."

"I'll tell you, moppet," said Ambrose bluntly. "The plug ugly who was standing guard on this landing is lying flat on his back, full of sleeping tablets, and Rose has been slugged on the head with a heavy blunt instrument. We wished to make sure that you had not joined the casualties, having, as Grogan so aptly suggested, been given your quietus either with a bare bodkin or a pillow over your face. Better brush your hair and come downstairs."

A very nasty shiver went through me.

"You wait till I've brushed my hair," I said quickly. "I'd rather have company."

"I'll wait," said Ambrose blandly.

Grogan said nothing, but waited too. I had an idea that Ambrose would rather the man had gone downstairs and waited there.

While I brushed my hair, which was standing up in tangles all over my head, Ambrose said irritably:

"Was that infernal laboratory key available? I think the way that store of dangerous drugs was open to everyone, fantastically and criminally irresponsible."

"Don't be crass," said Grogan, in a tired and acrid voice. "The key is safe enough and the laboratory sealed. But it's locking the stable door, don't you think? Anyone in the

house could have secreted any amount of sleeping stuff . . . or anything else."

"Damned criminal," said Ambrose acidly.

I turned round in time to see Grogan shrug.

Ambrose looked at me, took me by the elbow as if he was an outraged schoolmaster, and walked me out of the room. It was almost as if he blamed me for the plug ugly who was lying there on the thick carpet of the landing with his mouth open and a thick snoring breathing. He looked almost comic in his ornate uniform, and yet rather pathetic, so large and strong and tough when he was awake, and now lumpish and helpless. I saw suddenly that he was quite young, only about twenty-two.

"Are you just going to leave him lying there?" I asked indignantly.

"He'll be all right," said Ambrose callously. "He won't even have a headache when he wakes up, only a rather thick head."

"And the sack," said Grogan thinly from behind me.

"But that's not fair," I insisted, while Ambrose marched me towards the stairs. "It isn't as if he got drunk or anything. Someone must have slipped the sleeping draught or whatever it was into his tea or something."

"The girl talks sense," said Ambrose over his shoulder. "You must have justice in everything, my dear Dictator. If the man only drank his evening cup of cocoa or tea or whatever is the beverage your staff imbibe as a nightcap, you can't blame him if someone slipped dope into it."

Grogan said nothing and we went on until we got into a small library sort of room, which opened onto a dead-end passage off the big hall. It was a nice room. The only really lived-in room in the house. It was even a bit shabby. There were two old leather saddle-back chairs, a big desk with an

old swivel chair in front of it, a very old chair which had once had a seat of red leather stamped with golden fleur de lis. But now the red was darkened to dull maroon, and the fleur de lis almost rubbed out. It was a nice, studious sort of chair like the one my father had, and which he cherished because he had had it when he was at Oxford. All the rest was bookshelves and books, a big fireplace and no central heating. A real room.

"Sit down, Delia," said Grogan when we got in there.

Somehow I had expected to find March and Hollow there, both of them panting for information, but we were alone, the three of us, and the room welcomed us, and was quiet and friendly and secure.

"Better brew some coffee in that machine of yours," said Ambrose pleasantly.

Grogan went to a beautiful old corner cupboard and took out an electric Cona, a plastic, transparent container full of coffee beans, and a coffee bean grinder, which he screwed onto the corner of a small ebony table in a corner of the room. He began to grind the beans and the room filled with the aroma of coffee. Ambrose took the Cona and went out of the room and returned with the correct amount of water in it. Grogan poured the ground coffee into the top of the container, and plugged the machine lead into a plug in the wall. The plug was just at the right height and I wondered, as I had often wondered before, why people always had to have electric plugs in the wainscoting, or any place where it was difficult to get at, and where one had to bend down and fumble. Why couldn't one have plugs in walls at about waist height?

Then it occurred to me that it was rather frivolous to think about that sort of thing, when the Frog Footman was lying drugged on the landing, presumably so that

someone could get into my room and stifle me to death with a pillow, and when Rose was lying upstairs, having been slugged with a blunt instrument. Why Rose and me singled out? I wished, guiltily and unhappily, that I could remember just what I had told Rose that night. I couldn't think of anything that would make either of us dangerous to a murderer. I was in an absolute maze myself. I couldn't make sense of anything. And Rose was just a rather gossipy little housemaid, who was having an affair, or on the verge of having an affair with Grogan's confidential secretary. And after all—though if one was a sufficiently moral and stuffy person, one would deeply disapprove of Rose—one knew perfectly well that that sort of thing went on in all kinds of high, respectable families. Ambrose said it was something to do with the English Public School system. Enforced chastity or something, which made boys of seventeen or so have affairs with housemaids, because the English took such an odd view of adolescence. He always said it meant seduced housemaids in upper class households, when if we only took the continental view and realised that boys of seventeen and eighteen had the natural desires of all young men, and admitted it, a lot of trouble would be saved. But we hadn't any adolescents in Grogan's house. Unless, of course, you counted Mark Cobden. He was distinctly adolescent. I began to wonder how late adolescence lasted in America where there was co education. Necking and all that. Rather scruffy, I always thought, if I saw a film about American Teen-Agers. I mean the boys were always so much more juvenile than the girls, and you were supposed to sympathise with the little idiots because they used their father's cars and took out Sophomores or something and got drunk, and then had babies and didn't seem to understand why. I supposed that getting drunk and

hopping into bed didn't really make you grow up, as they always seemed to believe in American films. I mean, it's just silly. Unless you understand why it's wrong to do a thing, you just go on doing it. Just because the consequences are unpleasant or embarrassing doesn't stop you. You just think you had bad luck. You've got to know it's both wrong and *silly*, and *feel* wrong and silly before you change. And I just felt that Mark Cobden hadn't yet found out what things are wrong-silly. Like cheating at cards. He just felt that that was rather clever, like the boys in the Teen-Age films thought it was rather clever to go out in Pa's car to Red Mike's Roadhouse, and take Betsy Anne and have a lot of drinks that they weren't supposed to have, and when they were found out, just felt that it was all on a par with the tiresome ideas of the narrow-minded adult world, and they hadn't really done anything wrong, but people just thought so. And so they had a grievance, and either, quite falsely, found they loved Betsy Anne, and the parents gave way, and Betsy Anne was married and lived happily ever after, thereby confounding the stupid, narrow-minded parents and school teachers; or else they slid out and were stamped as 'heels' and quiet Johnny Jones, who had always loved Betsy Anne and been despised, turned out to be Sir Galahad, and Betsy Anne sobbed in his arms and married him. And then the film came to an end with soft music and beaming parents (Betsy Anne's) and Johnny Jones in the moonlight planning a little house, and wondering whether he could ask the Boss for a rise at Easter.

Quite sickening.

What I mean is that it was beastly mean of Betsy Anne to take advantage of Johnny Jones, and even meaner of Betsy Anne's parents. Because quite obviously Johnny Jones was a bit of a moron, and rather servile at that. And Betsy

Anne would really despise him to the end of her life, but being the far-sighted little so-and-so that she was, she grabbed the chance of marrying him and hiding up her scruffy little affair. So one didn't like any of them, and it was all false sentiment and false philosophy, and rather evil really. That does sound rather earnest and dramatic about a silly Teen-Age film, but somehow I think they're more important than people think. I don't believe that it is gangster films that make teen-agers go wrong and do bad and stupid things; gangster films are so outside the run of life that people only use them for some kind of letting off steam, they don't really visualise themselves robbing banks, or shooting floosies without so much as a split second's hesitation; they don't see themselves really bucking the world for twenty grand; but if they're very young and silly, and a bit unself-confident and romantic, girls do see themselves involved in what they think is love drama and revolt against silly parental objections and conventions, and they get a kind of kick out of imagining themselves the heroine of a rash romantic episode, but, of course, always with the let-out, the homely, noble young man who is waiting to cherish them. What the silly idiots don't realise is that the homely, noble young man is probably also a smug young man, with parents too, and he just wouldn't dare upset his parents by taking on Betsy Anne after she's been involved in some silly scandal and got a baby by it. So the idiot girls just go ahead and risk the baby, and I suppose the idiot youths get a kick out of imagining themselves driving about in Poppa's car, and taking sweater girls to roadhouses, and getting tight and seducing them; and, of course, the afore-said youths always have a sticky, rich, stuffy Mama or Papa who would not dream of allowing them to do the right thing and make an honest woman out of the girl. So it's a

lovely safe bet. Luckily, English Papas are most gloomily allergic to allowing their eighteen-year-old sons to take out girl-friends in their cherished cars. So English youths don't get half the chances of American youths. And ought to be terribly frustrated as a result. But somehow they don't seem to be. Perhaps it's something to do with playing cricket. Cricket has always seemed to me to be a most philosophic game, and, of course, if you're longing to represent your school or your university at cricket, girls are out. They just can't compete with young English youth when it comes to cricket.

All these awfully solemn thoughts had come to me while Ambrose and Henry Grogan were making coffee, and they had all started with Mark Cobden and Rose. And Mark Cobden being American adolescent, even though he was too old for such nonsense, but nevertheless being like that, and not minding being caught cheating at cards, because somehow in his mind it was an amusing and clever thing to do. I was quite sure Mark was like that. Superficial and carefully having no morals, but not really being brave enough to have wicked love affairs as he would like to have had, not even brave enough really to have seduced Rose, because if he had and Grogan had heard of it, there would have been such a hell of a to-do. Grogan wouldn't have been a snobbish American Mama or Papa, or thought Cobden must be saved at all costs. He'd have raised all hell and high water and have sacked Mark and Rose. . . . And what would Mark have done without his lovely, safe haven with Grogan? But he, Mark, wouldn't have minded being caught cheating at cards, because he could have turned it into a joke, something he'd just tried on, and wasn't the least ashamed of. And Grogan would have created and been pretty grim . . . and have seen that it didn't happen again.

but it wouldn't have been disaster. And what was all this leading up to? That Mark had got the wind up and slugged Rose to stop a scandal, and then meant to slug me because I might have known about it? No, that was absurd. Only it did seem fairly sure that someone had an idea that both Rose and I knew something that was dangerous. That was if Ambrose was right, and the plug ugly had been doped so that someone could get at me.

All this time I'd been taking it for granted that Rose was just slugged. Not—not dead. Suppose she was dead? That would be too horrible. But then what was the point of slugging her if not to kill her, and what would be the point of putting a pillow over my face, if not to kill *me*?

What I mean is, that if Mark Cobden was the sort of adolescent I had imagined him to be, then he might have slugged Rose to stop Grogan knowing he'd been so adolescent, and Rose might be having a baby and threatening him. But then why try and give me my quietus, as Ambrose had so uncomfortably suggested?

There was a knock on the door and Hollow came in. He looked tired and rather bored, but very polite.

"She'll pull through, Sir," he said to Grogan. "But it will be a long job, and it's not very probable that she will remember anything when she comes round."

"Pity," said Grogan thoughtfully.

"Yes Sir," said Hollow. "We're taking her to hospital. She'll be all right there."

"Very well," said Grogan stiffly.

It was plain that he did not approve of people being removed from his house and authority in this way, but realised that there was nothing he could do about it.

"Have some coffee, Hollow," said Ambrose cordially.

"No, thank you, Mr Merriman," said Hollow sadly.

"I'm going along with the ambulance. It will be here any moment now."

Ambrose said in a tight voice:

"Delia, you'd better try and tell Hollow exactly what you and Rose said to each other the night of the murder. And the next morning."

"I don't think it matters just now," said Hollow glumly. "It's not what they gossiped about that night that's important. Though we'll come to that later, when Miss Brown has had time to think it out. You can't expect her to be very accurate just now, after all this. Mr Grogan, the doctor is working on Smithers, the footman, now. And it seems that the man must have swallowed a lethal dose of whatever drug it was. He may not come round."

There was a horrid silence.

Ambrose said casually after about one minute:

"Was Smithers the footman who saw Miss Faversham near the laboratory and refused to say so, in spite of Rose's statement?"

"Yes," I said.

Ambrose grunted and Hollow gave him a typical Hollow glance, mournful and resigned, showing how much he deplored amateurs butting into police matters.

"The odds are," said Ambrose lazily, "that Rose administered the lethal dose in that case. Egged on by someone else, of course. But it seems to me necessary, if we believe that, that Rose should depart this life. She might have lost her head if Smithers died. And talked."

I rather agreed with him about that. Rose wasn't the kind of girl to go to the scaffold to save someone else. She would most certainly, if they had found out that she gave the fatal dose, have said who had given her the drug and told her what to do with it.

"Yes, Mr Merriman," said Hollow politely. "That had occurred to us."

"Well, you'd better pull Smithers round," said Grogan sharply. "He might remember who gave him his cocoa or whatever it was."

"We're taking him to hospital too, Mr Grogan," said Hollow stolidly.

Grogan laughed harshly.

"Since you think my house such a danger spot," he said, "why not take Miss Faversham to safety as well?"

"Miss Faversham," said Hollow in his sad quiet voice, "does not wish to go to a hospital or a nursing home. And, of course, she is a free agent."

"Is she now?" said Grogan in a curiously hard and derisive tone. But at the same time he seemed to relax suddenly, and a queer, pleased expression came into his eyes.

"I just came along to inform you what was happening," said Hollow gently. "By the way, I understand that both Mr Carstairs and Mr Dumont are now in residence here?"

"They are," said Grogan curtly. "It appeared to me to be more convenient that all the—er—people concerned in this deplorable affair should remain under the same roof. They are then available at any moment should the police wish to ask some pertinent question."

"Quite so," said Hollow, with an exquisite dying cadence of understanding. "Very thoughtful. The—er—house and grounds are being well patrolled. Mr Grogan. Just in case anyone should take it into his or her head to leave without warning."

"Kindly ask your men not to trample on the flower beds," said Grogan firmly. "My gardener is partial to a certain amount of nature and has a number of quite special

plants growing in disarray in grass and odd corners. He would be most upset if they were trodden on."

"I believe the Detective Sergeant has consulted with the gardener on that point," said Hollow placidly. "Our men have been well briefed."

Without warning Grogan's face flashed into pure, friendly humour. "I might have trusted Sandy," he said. "I'm sorry, Hollow, to have seemed boorish and obstructive, but I must admit that I am more than a little distressed by Countess Orvini's death, and these other very ominous occurrences."

"I understand, Mr Grogan," said Hollow delicately. "It's most unpleasant in every way."

"Hollow," said Ambrose languidly. "Before you surpass that magnificent understatement, kindly go away. We can stand just so much police humour and no more."

"Humour, Mr Merriman?" enquired Hollow, with a pained expression.

But he went away at once. I had an impression that it was only great self control that stopped him scurrying to the door. I'd have bolted if I'd been responsible for the pale fury that came into Grogan's face.

"No good tangling with Hollow," said Ambrose blandly when the door had closed. "He's too good a policeman to try and buck. In my own humble opinion, he can run rings round March, though March is pretty good. The thing is, March is from the Yard, and one of the big panjandrums, and Hollow is merely a Superintendent in the County Police, and is supposed to have no experience except with poachers and the wicked burglars who come down and burgle the wealthy Black Marketeers who have bought up all the houses round here. . . ."

Grogan interrupted sourly.

"Do you include me in the Black Marketeers?" he asked.

"No," said Ambrose blandly. "International financiers come in a different category."

"Higher or lower?" asked Grogan grimly.

Ambrose flickered a smile.

"They stand in a category of their own," he said. "Outside ordinary catalogue-ing."

"I see," said Grogan.

Ambrose switched off the Cona, and began to pour out coffee. It was very quiet in the house, or in this room. Perhaps outside the cloistered stillness all kinds of things were happening. I wished Jan Faversham was also going off in an ambulance. I even wished in a craven way that I was being firmly removed from this house. But it wasn't any good wishing. And again, I knew that though I was scared stiff, I still wanted to stay so long as Ambrose was here.

"By the way, Grogan," said Ambrose pensively as he handed me a cup of strong black coffee, "what have you got on Edward Collingwood? He's not behaving according to Hoyle."

"As if I should tell you," said Grogan crisply.

"Then I must find out," said Ambrose sadly. "I shall, you know."

"I wouldn't try if I was you," said Grogan cheerfully.

"Curiosity killed the cat."

"Cats," said Ambrose, "are notoriously tough. I'll risk it. I am a curious person."

"Collingwood had nothing to do with any of this," said Grogan curtly. "You can take my word for that."

"All right," said Ambrose indifferently. "Would you mind telling me one thing. How and why did Mark

Cobden come to be in the position he is in your household?"

Grogan said nothing for a full minute, and then he gave a frightening, stretched grin.

"That's something you can find out for yourself," he said. "I don't want to protect the little swine, but I won't help anyone to do him down."

"Even if he's a murderer?" asked Ambrose.

Grogan went as pale as a bone, his skin seemed to be stretched over his cheek and jawbones.

"If I thought he'd murdered Lila," he said, "I'd give him to the police trussed up on a plate, but he didn't. That's one thing you can bank on. It wasn't Cobden. Oh no, it wasn't Cobden."

"I had an idea it might be," said Ambrose negligently.

"Then don't get any more ideas like that," said Grogan loudly. "They're not healthy and they're damn ridiculous!"

"Delia," said Ambrose. "Come and walk in the moonlight. It's stuffy in here."

I went with him meekly. As a matter of fact I was awfully glad to get away from Grogan. I had an idea that if we stayed much longer he'd do something rather violent to Ambrose.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

WALKING in the moonlight in Grogan's quite lovely garden was not quite the tranquil experience one might expect. The moonlight turned everything into hard edges, black and white; but there were quite a number of clumps of shrubs and things that were less defined and they one and all seemed to be inhabited by well-trained shadows that moved out of them, saluted Ambrose respectfully, murmured "Goodnight, Sir," and then melted back into the shrub again. Of course, it's possible that the entire county constabulary were not in Grogan's grounds that night, but it did seem to me that the majority must be there.

"Delia," said Ambrose while we were walking across a large and beautiful lawn, "do me a favour. Keep away from swimming pools and any places where you could be knocked on the head and not noticed for some time, will you?"

"Truly," I remarked to the pale night sky, "you do seem intent on frightening me to death. If you think I'm likely to be turned in a corpse at short notice, I should have thought you'd be rather keen on getting me away from here. I'm quite certain Daddy would take a very poor view of it."

"Maybe I should do that," said Ambrose doubtfully. "The only thing is that I think you're probably better here, where I can keep an eye on you, than running round in London, where I can't."

"Oh," I said.

He laughed suddenly and tucked his arm into mine.

"You're a nice little moppet," he said affectionately. "And you know quite a lot about stamps."

"Look," I said. "If I'm going to stay around here at the risk of my life, then I do think you might tell me who you think is likely to do me in."

"If I told you," he said seriously, "it wouldn't help. The murderer, of course. But if I told you you'd give it away, you couldn't help it. And though I'm dead sure who it is, I can't prove it. Nowhere near. Hollow agrees with me. And, Delia, I have an idea that you're very important in more ways than one. I think you may save poor Jan Faversham. Not only her life, but her reason. I promise you I'll tell you anything I find out that it's safe to tell you."

"Well, I find it all very comforting," I said gloomily. "And maybe I might make my will."

"Maybe you might," Ambrose agreed pleasantly. "On the other hand, I find such an idea both morbid and pessimistic."

As we came round the tall hedge that guarded the swimming pool on the south side, a figure moved suddenly, stepping back from the edge of the pool jerkily. I had a split second glimpse before it moved, and it had been like a statue, a meditative statue, chin dropped onto chest, shoulders sagging with melancholy.

"Hullo," said Ambrose with his usual brutal lack of tact. "Contemplating suicide, Collingwood?"

"Not yet," said Edward Collingwood politely. "I was, if you must know, contemplating taking a moonlight dip—and wondering whether that would come under the category 'Dangerous Occupation'."

"Can't you swim?" asked Ambrose.

"I swim well enough," said Collingwood.

"Subject to cramp?" asked Ambrose with what I felt was a quite odious solicitude.

The moonlight washed down into the pool, and on one side the old brick walls made shadows that seemed as if they had been meticulously done in Indian ink, short shadows, sharp and defined. The pale light made shadows on Collingwood's face, throwing his cheekbones into high relief, and making a high light along the taut line of his jaw. But his eyes were lost in shadow and I wished I could see them. It's hateful not seeing a person's eyes, you don't know anything about them or how they're feeling. I got the impression he was hating us both, and in a way I understood that. Ambrose threatened some guarded secret of his, and I was with Ambrose. I wondered suddenly whether everyone in the world had secrets in their life that seemed absolutely harmless until something awful happened, something like murder, and then those quite harmless secrets suddenly became dangerous and sinister. Or you thought they did. When, perhaps, all the time if you'd only told them at once, they would have proved to be sheer nonsense. Unimportant. But kept secret they gained strength and dangerousness. Like all the things in the subconscious that Trick Cyclists are always going on about.

"No," said Edward, "I'm not subject to cramp either, thank you, Merriman."

"Then I can see no objection to you indulging in moonlight dips as often as you like," said Ambrose, with the manner of one handsomely conceding a point.

Edward moved slightly so that the moonlight caught his face from another angle. I could see his eyes now and they were looking at us with a faint, frowning amusement.

"Ambrose," he said, quite cheerfully, "you're an im-

pertinent little brute at times, but I suppose you consider this is in the cause of justice. I could do with a drink. A long, strong drink. Let's break into the bar."

"Someone's already done so," said Ambrose, and jerked his head towards the house. The big plate glass windows of the bar let out a bright panel of light onto the paved terrace outside them, and showed the interior of the bar most theatrically.

Peter was behind the curved counter, and Mark Cobden was there, sitting hunched on a stool with his elbows on the counter and his chin propped in his hands. His hair was untidy and his face horribly white. And he was grinning painfully and fixedly at nothing.

"So I see," said Edward softly. "How very interesting. Master Cobden looks upset."

Ambrose sighed.

"Another master of the art of understatement," he said. "You and Hollow should get together, Collingwood."

Collingwood laughed rather curtly.

"I should like to see the little cheat much more upset," he remarked. "Well, not even he is keeping me from that drink. Come on."

I could tell by the way Ambrose's left eyebrow lifted that he found Edward's behaviour more than a little peculiar. But I didn't think so myself. After all, if he'd been married to Jan Faversham, he must be feeling a bit wrought up one way and another. And Ambrose had hinted that Grogan had 'something' on him, and if that was true, then poor Edward must be feeling pretty well tied up.

Still, he wasn't the type who would ordinarily fly to large drinks for bolstering up, and perhaps that was what Ambrose was raising his eyebrow over. And I did think it was alarming in a way myself.

We walked away from the pool and smartly over to the bar, where Ambrose rapped on the window so that Mark Cobden jumped nervously, and Peter came quickly, but so very gracefully, and let us in.

"Hullo," said Mark in a high kind of voice. "Isn't this a jolly sort of party?"

He giggled unexpectedly and squinted towards me.

"Everyone expecting to find you liquidated too," he giggled. "Grogan and old Merriman banging at door, b'lieving you done in by wicked, wicked killer."

Nobody said anything, though Ambrose looked at him with a thoughtful, rather unnering interest, and Edward Collingwood with unconcealed disgust.

He giggled again. "Showing bad form," he said in a slurred voice. "Deuced bad form, ol' boy, ol' boy. Not being English. Two English gentlemen finding coarse, crude American deuced bad for a."

"Not at all," said Collingwood unpleasantly. "I only find you extremely drunk and rather frightened."

"Frigh'ened?" said Mark angrily. "Frigh'ened. What've I got to be frigh'ened of? She's the one to be frigh'ened. Gro'an an' his stooge said so. I'm only mournin' fo' poor lil Rose. Poor lil Rose. Lil Rose cut off long before she's faded. Tough."

"Not cut off," said Ambrose calmly. "Not cut off after all. Chap didn't bash hard enough, and she's got a nice thick skull. Cease to mourn."

Mark made an odd noise as if he was going to be sick, then he stared at Ambrose.

"Not dead?" he asked incredulously.

"Not dead," said Ambrose. "Safe in hospital. Plug Ugly the footman has gone to hospital too. Let that assuage your grief."

He turned to Peter. "I think Miss Brown could do with a brandy," he said pleasantly. "I'll have beer."

"And I'll have whisky," said Edward.

"An' I'll go to bed," said Mark with a ludicrous dignity. "Go to bed. Mind at rest. An' not likin' present company. Not likin' darn silly stuffed shirts of Englishmen. . . ."

He got carefully off the stool and walked with conscious steadiness towards the door. There he paused for a few seconds and stared solemnly at the handle.

"An' you, Collingwood," he said over his shoulder. "Darned stuffed hypocrite, thass you. What'll you do for dope now? Lab's locked. Lab's all locked up. Sealed up. Sickening."

He opened the door and walked out.

"Steady," said Ambrose, and caught Edward's arm to stop him bolting after Mark Cobden.

"I'll break his foul little neck," said Edward between his teeth.

His eyes were bright with pure rage and the freckles stood out golden against his pallor.

"Not worth hanging for," said Ambrose. "Calm down. Leave him to Grogan."

Edward relaxed suddenly and sat down on the stool Mark had vacated. He pulled a notebook out of his pocket and a pencil, and began to write down what looked like algebraic formulae or something. He took a gulp of neat whisky and then smiled rather shakily at Ambrose.

"I don't, you know," he said.

"Don't dope?" asked Ambrose. "I should say not. Mug's game."

Edward made a lot more x's and Y's and a's and B's, and appeared to obtain some satisfactory answer to the problem.

Then he said, indifferently, "I use mathematics, not dope, when I'm feeling nerve-wracked."

"I play Patience," Ambrose told him. "It helps me to think."

"So does this," said Edward firmly.

He looked over at me. "Sorry, Delia," he said. "I seem to land you in awkward situations constantly."

"Oh, that's all right," I said ineptly.

Ambrose grinned at me and patted me affectionately. "Nice little creature," he said. "Nicely brought up. Really good manners."

The truth was that quite suddenly I was overcome with tiredness. My eyelids kept on dropping in spite of myself. It didn't matter if someone did wish to smother me or anything, I had to go to bed, and I said so.

"I'll come up with you," said Ambrose. "Will you be here for a little while, Edward?"

I had a confused idea that everything must be all right if Ambrose was calling Collingwood Edward. He wouldn't do that if he thought the man was a murderer or a dope fiend. Of course he wouldn't. I was vaguely rather pleased about that. I smiled sleepily at Ambrose because I was rather pleased, and he put his arm through mine and positively supported me all the way up to my room.

He didn't need to tell me to lock my door. Sleepy as I was, I wouldn't have forgotten to do that.

Janet brought me breakfast in bed. It was rather as if I'd gone back to being five years old and my nurse was looking after me. She put down the tray and said, "Good morning, Miss Delia. It's eleven-thirty, and Mr Merriman says will you go along to Miss Faversham's room as soon as you're ready. I'll see to your bath while you have breakfast."

"Yes," I said meekly.

I liked it, really. It made me feel very safe and looked after. And her voice was nice. Strong and calm and reassuring.

"How is Miss Faversham?" I added as she bustled round and picked up the clothes I'd slid out of before going to sleep.

"She's better, Miss Delia," said Janet. "But the doctor won't let her up. It makes her restless, but Mr Merriman is with her and he seems to manage her beautifully."

He would, I thought grimly. Managing people and charming frogs off ponds. Mr Ambrose Merriman's diversions as quoted in *Who's Who*. Somehow I didn't quite approve of Ambrose in Jan Faversham's bedroom managing her beautifully. Maybe it was petty bourgeois of me, but I didn't really approve.

"What a lovely breakfast," I said in hollow, but determinedly light tones.

"I'm glad you like it, Miss Delia," said Janet. "Eat it up and your bath will be ready."

I nearly said, "Yes, Nurse." And at the same time I wondered how on earth she came to be calling me Miss Delia. As if I was one of Grogan's family, or really was only about five years old.

She went into the bathroom and turned on taps while I ate kidneys and bacon, which I hadn't eaten for years and years. The windows were open and still the perfect weather continued. I could see a sky like stretched blue silk and the tree tops quite motionless in the hot windless day. The drone of a lawn-mower went on and on, and for a moment it didn't seem possible that all this sordid murder and drugging and assaulting were happening in such a wonderful world.

I finished breakfast and looked at the paper which had been put on the tray, so neatly folded that it looked as if it had been ironed, and saw in thick black type across the head of the front page, the news of Countess Orvini's death. And realised with a sick feeling that the inquest was this afternoon. After that I only wanted to have my bath and get dressed and find Ambrose. Seeing it in the papers and knowing that I should have to stand up in front of a lot of people and a coroner made everything suddenly real and frightening again, as it had been the night it happened. I supposed that the very impersonality and smoothness of Henry Grogan's household had helped to make Lila Orvini's death something almost unreal. At any rate not ghastly. But that was because all these people weren't very real. Somehow you didn't visualise them doing ordinary comforting things, like poking the fire, or liking scrambled eggs and being awfully pleased when it was possible to get more than one egg in the week; you couldn't feel that they would be affectionate or sorrowful or anything, they lived theatrically, doing expensive things even when they could not afford them, like Duncan Carstairs and Pierre Dumont . . . and Lila herself. So one didn't think of them as real.

But when the inquest started the coroner and the jury wouldn't understand that, they'd ask questions and questions, and newspaper men would be there. And you'd feel somehow callous and sordid because you didn't feel how terrible it was that someone had been murdered. Of course, you did feel it with your mind. You *knew* it. But you hadn't any emotion about it, and that was somehow humiliating and frightening, as if you'd caught some of the unreality and indifference.

I scurried through my dressing, and Janet came and took me along to Jan's room.

She was sitting up in a big fourposter bed and she looked very defenceless and lost. Her hair was brushed straight back from her high forehead and tied around with an Alice in Wonderland snood, and she had on lipstick but no rouge or powder; and she wore a yellow bed-jacket of quilted silk.

Ambrose was sitting on the edge of her bed, and a nurse in uniform came in from the private bathroom carrying a glass of milk. She was obviously one of those super discreet nurses who belong to super-discreet doctors, and I felt that she had probably been called in time and time again in rich and ducal houses when it was a case of some scandal which must be hidden at all costs. She simply exuded discretion and understanding, and had a smug round face and down-cast eyes.

Jan, however, didn't seem to respond to her personality, because her enormous eyes went very bright, and she made a back-handed movement and flipped the glass of milk off the tray and, wham, onto the floor.

"Take the filthy stuff away," she said shrilly, "and take yourself away too."

The nurse smiled forgivingly, in a way calculated to drive any patient into a further frenzy, picked up the glass and took out a handkerchief and began to mop at the carpet.

"I'll do that for you, Nurse," said Janet firmly. "I think Mr Cave has some coffee and sandwiches for you down in the little parlour."

The nurse looked meeker than ever and more superior than ever, but she departed, and Jan gave Janet an outrageous wink and said, "You're a darling lamb, Janet. For heaven's sake go and tell Henry Grogan that if he doesn't get rid of that snake there'll be another murder in the house."

"That's not the way to talk, Miss Jan," said Janet, and looked her most craggy and stern.

"Please, Janet," said Jan. "Please, please, please. She'll send me mad."

"Here's Miss Delia come to see you," said Janet.

Jan looked at me, flickered her lashes and then held out her left hand.

"Hello, Delia," she said in an odd, shy voice. "I think I made a bit of an exhibition of myself yesterday. I'm sorry."

"I should think so," said Janet. "I'm away to get you some more milk, and this time you'll drink it."

She stalked out of the room.

Jan made a face at the door when it had closed again.

"Bully," she observed gloomily.

"She's like someone's old nurse," I said, for the sake of saying something.

Jan laughed with an unexpected and very youthful gaiety.

"She is someone's old nurse," she answered. "She's Edward's. Edward Collingwood, you know."

I suppose I must have stared like a gawp, because she laughed again and Ambrose gave a short chuckle.

"I know," said Ambrose. "It's a bit startling, isn't it? But she's a tower of strength."

"But why should Edward Collingwood's old nurse be a housemaid here?" I asked.

Jan sighed.

"It's a long story," she said. "But why not, really? Old nurses have to go somewhere, don't they?"

Ambrose intervened. "Tell Delia about those gelatine capsules," he said. "It's interesting, Delia."

I could only suppose that he'd already done his famous

lion taming and frog charming act, because, instead of being difficult, which one would have expected, she merely frowned slightly and then nodded in a very thoughtful way.

"It's peculiar really," she said, "and rather frightening, I think."

"There's nothing to be frightened of," said Ambrose firmly. "But you've got to tell March."

She looked at me for a minute as if she wasn't really sure she would tell me, and then she shrugged slightly.

"It's just this," she said. "I went into the bar on my own the night when Lila was—murdered. I was feeling rather frantic for one reason and another, never mind that now, and I thought I'd talk to Peter, because he's soothing and beautifully detached. Well . . . the thing is . . ." she glanced doubtfully at Ambrose, who nodded encouragingly, and she went on, ". . . the thing is that Lila had one of her beastly urges about Peter. She used to get them about the most unlikely people, and if they wouldn't play, then she pestered them and made their lives a misery, she'd ferret round and find out things about them, and use them to get her own way . . . it's all simply beastly, and I don't think I ought to tell you this sort of thing. . . ."

"It's all right," said Ambrose blandly. "Delia has such a nice mind that she won't really understand how really sickening it all is, but she's got a clear mind and sometimes she hits on something that is useful."

He knows it infuriates me when he's patronising, but I didn't pay any attention. I was thinking all the time that I did understand very well about someone like Lila. It's funny how when you hear something that you've never knowingly heard about before, some queer deep little spring in your mind wells up, and you do understand how it all is. I'd felt that about Lila all the time, only until now

I couldn't have told anyone what I felt. It had to be told to me and then I recognised it as something I'd understood all along. So I just smiled briefly at Jan and went on listening.

"You see," said Jan, as if she was talking to herself, "it was really power she wanted. She simply must have it. Power of all sorts. People had got to do what she wanted and—and acknowledge that she was more powerful, more beautiful and cleverer than anyone else. So you see, on the occasions when she was attracted even slightly by any man, he'd got to fall down and worship her . . . or else it was a defeat, and then she had at him. Well, she had this thing about Peter. Chiefly, I honestly think, because she couldn't make any impression on him. You know what he's like. Grave and polite and utterly elusive and detached. She couldn't bear that. Not even in a servant. All the servants had to acknowledge her charm and power. They had to be in love with her in a funny kind of way. It wasn't enough that they admired her and all that kind of thing. It had to be an emotional thing. . . ."

She stopped for a moment and gave a sad little sigh.

"Peter wasn't amenable. He just remained detached and polite and the same towards her as towards everyone else. She couldn't even make him hate her, and she'd rather you hated her than were indifferent to her. Everyone else fell in one way or another . . . even Duncan . . . even Edward. Though those two hated themselves for it. Everyone . . . except Peter . . . and . . ." For the second time since I'd been in the room she burst into spontaneous and quite gay amusement. "And Janet!"

I laughed too. I tried to imagine Janet with her quite fierce integrity ever falling down and worshipping Lila Orvini. And then I remembered what Rose had said . . . how surprised I had been that she seemed to love Lila

. . . and somehow after that Lila seemed to become a little gruesome . . . like a vampire or a witch, something soul-less and—not even wicked—just soul-less and egoistic and only aware of itself.

Ambrose interrupted pensively. "The Plug Uglies. They didn't fall for her. They just thought her an immoral floosie . . . as simple as that. What I mean to say is, with all due respect to you both, they'd have made her with much enjoyment . . . but there wouldn't have been anything emotional about it, and that's all. Sensible fellows!"

Jan looked dubious, but then a faint smile crooked her mouth.

"Well, that's how it was," she went on, talking hurriedly as if now she wanted to get it over quickly. "Nothing she said or did made any difference to Peter. She couldn't even make him mad. . . . He only . . ." Once again that little smile crooked her mouth, and I saw how delightful and gay she must be when she was not driven by anxiety and misery as she had been ever since I met her. ". . . only became more Deep South than ever and that maddened her. Well, the thing is I had to tell you all that for you to see the point about the capsules. The night of the murder, after it had happened . . . after you'd gone to bed, Delia, I was desperately wrought up. I was terrified who'd done it . . . terrified it might be poor Duncan . . . he's so—so unstable, and he hated her so . . . Duncan and Pierre had been interviewed by the police and gone back to Duncan's cottage, and Mark had been rushing around, getting the maids together and doing things for Henry, and I couldn't go to bed, so I went along to the bar, where Peter was just as usual. He was strumming that guitar, some very melancholy, dirge-like tune, and I sat up on a stool and had a drink and listened. Then Henry sent for him to go

along and take some whisky or something, and while he was gone I just sat there, feeling dazed and perhaps a little tight. You know there's a mirror round the inside of the bar, and I could see under the counter reflected there, and tucked carelessly behind some glasses was a pill box with about half a dozen of those capsules in it. I suddenly felt quite sick. I didn't think anything but how dreadful it was that Peter should have been driven to murder by Lila. I just thought it instantly. It seemed so plain. And I was feeling queer and light-headed and still hating, hating Lila for all she'd done, so I got off the stool, hurried round the bar and took the pill box . . . so that the police wouldn't find it . . . and I never said anything. I just thought the police wouldn't find them now and how careless of Peter. And then I went to bed, and I—I got rid of them . . . in the bathroom."

"Very delicately put," said Ambrose with approval.

She shook her head impatiently.

"Don't be flippant," she said. "It's too serious . . . it's too awful. I don't believe I should tell anyone. I don't know why I told you. But I suppose now I shall have to tell that man March, or you'll tell him. The awful thing is that I couldn't sleep and I got up, put on a house-gown and was wondering whether it would be any good going downstairs again, whether I might find Mark or someone to talk to when I heard Edward talking on the terrace outside my window. He was talking to Peter, and he said angrily, 'What the devil do you mean, asking me if I collected that box of capsules? Of course I didn't. I'd forgotten all about them. . . . Did you leave anyone alone in the bar?' I didn't hear what Peter said. They moved off or something . . . but he must have told Edward about me. . . . That's why Edward has been so queer to me."

And that, I thought, was why she had been so queer, too. She'd thought that Edward believed she had poisoned Lila and it had just got her nerves going all haywire.

"Don't be ridiculous," said Ambrose lazily. "Taking capsules at that period was like locking the door after the horse had been stolen, if you see what I mean. Whoever had had the ingenious idea of shoving sudden death into that capsule had done it long before."

Jan looked at him and shivered. Her face shivered and then her whole body, the shiver went down her the way a shiver goes down a smooth dog, like a ripple in the skin.

"I suppose so," she said at last.

She was beginning to act. Until now she had been perfectly natural and sincere, but it was as if she had remembered something that she must keep hidden, and now she must act.

"Edward and Henry were always experimenting," she whispered doubtfully. "Henry used to study forensic medicine. He—he was horribly interested in poisons. Edward wasn't so interested in the poisons, but in the methods by which people could be poisoned without it being found out. They used to spend hours arguing about it."

"Darling," said Ambrose, positively tenderly, "are you trying to sell us the idea that it was Henry who poisoned Lila? And when did these fascinating discussions take place?"

She went a burning, painful scarlet, and her lashes fluttered madly. I was quite certain that she wasn't a natural eyelash flutterer. She couldn't fake that burning flush, and she was pretty well gripped by some strong emotion, but still she had enough presence of mind to flutter. She was really a good actress, I found myself think-

ing rather acidly. And how did she know how the poison had been administered? I mean, it hadn't been bruited abroad, though I supposed, to be fair, that it was pretty obvious. No it wasn't. The obvious thing was to think it must have been handed out in the gin.

"No," she said rather sulkily, after a long pause. "Besides, it was a long time ago, while I was married to Edward. They used to bore me to tears."

"Never mind," said Ambrose kindly. "Don't you like Henry?"

She wouldn't look at us.

"No, I don't," she said. "He does such beastly things. Like collecting us all for this weekend. We had to come. He just did it to torture me. And he knows I don't like meeting Edward, so he asked Edward down, so that Edward could be told about that picture fraud and be shown what a hopeless type I was. He's always been jealous because Edward loves me."

Ambrose paid no attention to that.

"How did you know she was poisoned by the capsule?" he asked suddenly.

"Well, of course she was . . ." Jan began sharply. "How else?" she ended lamely.

"Oh, I don't know," said Ambrose. "It might have been in the gin, you know. That seems the obvious medium. She swigged her drinks like a pirate, swallowed them in a gulp. It might have been in a fragile glass ampoule . . . like the Nazis kept about them in case of need. Down the hatch with the gin and with the ampoule and—pouf!"

I thought he was being unnecessarily brutal and ghoulish, but the effect on Jan Faversham was quite peculiar. She stared at him for a full minute. Her face plumped out before my eyes and the brilliant stare turned into something

less strained. It was painfully obvious that the idea was absolutely amazing to her, and at the same time an enormous relief.

"Yes . . ." she said slowly. "Yes, but of course. It could easily be that."

"So you see," said Ambrose cheerfully, "you can safely tell March about Peter and the gelatine containers."

Jan lay back against the pillows and smiled weakly.

"Yes, I can, can't I?" she said.

She reached out to the bedside table and took a cigarette from a particularly magnificent gold box.

"Have one," she said to me.

I shook my head. Somehow cigarettes out of such magnificence seemed too much of a good thing, but Ambrose—who hadn't been asked—beamed sweetly and took one.

"Do the police know anything yet?" she asked, after she'd lit her own cigarette from the match Ambrose held out to her.

"They haven't had much time," he said. "The inquest won't tell us much. They'll just show cause of death and ask for an adjournment, while they get really busy. Comb-ing chemists and all that sort of thing, winking out all our private affairs and gloomy secrets. . . ."

She interrupted him curtly.

"You don't need to tell me that," she said. "I'm not a complete idiot. I suppose they've discovered already that I went to London that afternoon and tried to get morphia from three different chemists?"

"They may not have discovered yet," said Ambrose. "But they will—of course. So you might as well tell March that and save him some trouble. Did you get it, by the way?"

"Not from a chemist," she said, tight-lipped.

"From Pierre Dumont?" he asked casually.

Her lips tightened even more, and a frozen smile came into her eyes.

"You all hate him, don't you?" she demanded coldly. "Because he's got more attraction in his little finger than any of you have in your whole bodies. . . ."

"Not for me," I remarked firmly.

She stared at me with complete disbelief, and I saw that it simply wasn't possible for her to imagine any woman not falling for him.

"Delia," said Ambrose in the manner of one explaining the obvious, "is still at the period when she falls in love with cowboys or the Mounties. Dumont is not her type."

I looked at him with disgust, but didn't trouble to contradict him because I would infinitely prefer people to think that than to believe I could fall for anything so absolutely depraved as Pierre Dumont.

It appeared as if that suggestion pleased Jan and she regarded me quite amiably, so I decided that she was pleased because it meant that I wasn't likely to try and interest Dumont while she was kept in bed and unable to see him. But it seemed pretty plain that she *had* got morphine from him, and I hated him more than ever. And I remembered how she had driven by so furiously the afternoon Ambrose and I arrived and I wondered what she had wanted the beastly stuff for.

Janet returned at that minute with some more milk.

"It's time for you to rest," she remarked firmly. "Just drink this up and I'll give you your pill."

"Have you got rid of that ghastly nurse?" demanded Jan darkly.

"Mr Grogan is arranging that," said Janet.

"I suppose you want us to go away," said Ambrose

peacefully, and got off the end of the bed. "By the way, Miss Faversham has some morphia hidden somewhere, I suggest you find it and take it away from her."

Jan gave a disconcertingly hilarious laugh.

"She won't find it," she assured him. "Don't worry."

Ambrose sighed heavily.

"That means we shall have to find out who you got it for," he told her. "Tiresome. Oh well, Delia will come along and see you later this afternoon and tell you all about the inquest."

"I shall like that," she flung at him bitterly.

"Au revoir," he answered and pushed me gently ahead of him out of the room.

"Which is more than I will," I told him angrily when we were out on the landing.

I saw there was a tall thin uniformed policeman sitting outside the door. He hadn't been there when I went into the room, and the sight of him dispelled my nervy anger and made me feel rather quiet and worried.

Ambrose nodded as we went down the stairs.

Apparently he must have realised how I felt and was nodding agreement, because he patted my shoulder in an avuncular way and said, "You can see for yourself what a silly person she is and how muddled. She knows too much and too little and that's dangerous for her. Someone might be anxious to make sure that she doesn't say something really informative without even realising what she's saying."

"I'm not at all sure she's as silly as she makes out," I told him seriously.

"Oh, she is," he assured me. "Sillier, if anything. She bored poor Collingwood to distraction once he'd got over being madly in love. But she doesn't bore Grogan. Grogan's

attitude to women is that the sillier they are the better, so long as they're pretty enough. Rather the Grand Turk attitude."

I could imagine that about Grogan. Just because he was like that, he didn't mind having someone like Lila Orvini around. She wasn't important enough to worry him, and if she behaved badly he just ordered her off to bed, or told her to behave, just as he had done that night in the bar. And she had obeyed him. Grand Turks had a habit of being obeyed, even if sometimes they were well and truly deceived. Perhaps they were easy to deceive because they were so blandly convinced that no one would dare. . . . Western Grand Turks couldn't exactly use the bastinado or have deceitful females tossed into the Bosphorus, but they could cast them into the outer darkness, out of the gold dusted light into the murky void of poverty. A fate worse than death to the Orvinis of this world.

"Do you think he thought Lila silly?" I asked Ambrose.

"He had a blind spot about her," he said. "He thought she was tiresome and a gold digger, but he was sentimental about her humble background and what he considered her struggle in life; he thought she was amusing really, a good-humoured little tough."

"Not a blackmailer," I suggested.

"Not a blackmailer," Ambrose agreed. "But it would have been interesting to see how she got out of the Tintoretto affair, whether she could have persuaded him that she wasn't in the fraud, but had been taken in herself by Carstairs and Dumont. That would have been her line. Incidentally, she tried to bribe me to give the fake a clean ticket, in a roundabout way. I think that's why she was killed. If she'd had to get out of trouble she'd have dragged in every other man, woman and child to take the rap, and

I have an idea there was someone else in that business besides Carstairs and Dumont, someone who simply could not face being dragged into it, someone very much in the background. Lila knew about him or her, but the others didn't. Grogan paid a lot of money for that canvas, you know, it was a pretty big carve-up . . . but it seems pretty obvious that neither Carstairs nor Dumont got a lot out of it. They think Lila grabbed the lot. . . . If she did I'm pretty sure she double-crossed somebody, in which case the motive was revenge; or else at the last gasp when the show-down came and Grogan was going to deal with her in the same way as the others . . . and he meant to gaol them, she was going to give the unknown party away and plead coercion or something."

"Someone outside the house?" I asked doubtfully.

"Don't be a little cluck," said Ambrose. "How could it be?"

By this time we were out on the terrace. I noticed that Ambrose always chose nice open spaces in which to conduct these conversations. No keyholes anywhere round, perhaps.

"But there's only Edward Collingwood and Mark Cobden in that case," I argued.

Ambrose nodded. "Both possibles," he said in a tiresomely judicial way. "But it might be Peter or even Cave . . . and there's always the possibility that she might know something diabolical about Carstairs and or Dumont which she could use to force them to accept full blame and let her out. No, we'll just plug along and hope for the best."

"What did you think about Jan's story," I asked.

"What did you?" he countered.

We'd wandered without noticing over to an umbrella-shaded table that overlooked the swimming pool. Sitting at it you looked down over the balustrade, and the pool was

beneath you, cool and blue, with diamond sparks glinting and reflecting as the water moved and swirled where Mark Cobden was swimming. His hair was wet and sleek and dark as a seal's, and he swam like a fish, twisting and darting.

Peter was standing in the open window of the bar and Ambrose waved genially to him.

"Long cool drinks," he called.

Peter smiled gravely and disappeared inside to get them.

"I think," I said carefully, "that it was true really. She did do what she said about those beastly capsules, and she was scared it might be Peter. She hated Lila so that she wouldn't want anyone to be caught for murdering the woman. But how *did* she know it was that capsule business?"

"Quite obviously someone told her," said Ambrose.

"Then she must know who did it," I objected.

He shook his head.

"I don't mean someone told her in so many words," he said. "What I think must have happened is that after the police had arrived and while everyone was flapping round and wondering whodunnit, something must have been said very carelessly by the one who did do it, that put the idea into her head. She didn't notice it at the time, it was probably unnoticed even when the chap let it drop, but when she took those capsules, she reacted automatically. She had already accepted the fact that the poison had been in a capsule. And that's the whole point. Has she remembered now what made her think about capsules and is she shielding whoever said it? There was a policeman sitting in the room all the time they were waiting to be interviewed by Hollow, quite a bright young man, I believe. He may have a few notes of what was said between them all. They were

taking to the bottle rather, which may have loosened tongues. But she may not have. . . . But does the murderer by any chance remember having let that indiscreet word drop? If he does, then she's on his list for elimination. It seems to me that X is a pretty wholesale character, and not very stable. It looks as if he's prepared to eliminate anyone he thinks might have a clue, even if they aren't aware of it themselves. Starting with Rose and the Plug Ugly."

Peter was coming towards us with two tall glasses filled with something pale green and with ice clinking in it.

"Mass Murder," I said with an air of bravado.

"Could be," said Ambrose.

And as Peter put the drinks down on the table, Ambrose said to him casually, "Peter, Miss Faversham is going to tell the police about taking those capsules from under the counter. They'll be asking you a few questions about them, you know. How they came to be there, that sort of thing."

"Yes, Mr Merriman," said Peter politely. "Well, of course, I'll tell them the truth when they ask me."

He bowed slightly and went back to the bar.

I liked it. I liked it very much indeed. It isn't often that anyone succeeds in snubbing Ambrose and leaving him speechless.

"Goody, goody for him," I said sweetly.

"Goody, goody, as you say," said Ambrose cheerfully, and suddenly began to chuckle.

"What is funny?" I asked coldly.

"The capsules," he said and doubled up with mirth. "The capsules in the bar, my little darling. The sinister capsules in the bar. Will some august faces be red over them? They surely will!"

"Will you stop being an idiot and tell me what you mean?" I said in bewilderment.

"I would have told you if you hadn't been so smug about Peter," said Ambrose at last. "But as it is I won't. You can take my word for it that it's just quite simply the funniest thing that ever happened."

I knew it wasn't any use trying to argue with him, so I took refuge in a cold hauteur and stared away over the heavenly garden.

"What you can do," Ambrose continued, pretending not to notice anything, "is to go in for nice girlish chats with Jan—you know, earnest ones, swapping confidences about all this, and try and find out just how she got the capsule idea into her head."

"And just wait till X comes in with a club and clonks both of us," I said coldly.

"Darling," said Ambrose, with an unexpected earnestness, "don't worry about that. Neither you nor Jan will be out of observation for a second. I would not risk your silly little neck for anything in the world."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE inquest was just as beastly as I'd expected it to be. Of course, the coroner was very polite in a steely way, but it was very plain that he disapproved of Henry Grogan and of all Henry Grogan's friends. You felt that he was profoundly thankful and yet surprised that only murder was in question, what he had really expected ever since Henry Grogan came to live in the district was something like what had overtaken the Egyptians when Abraham arrived in Egypt. I shuddered to think what would happen at the adjourned sitting. Up to now the man, who was pale and pompous, had confined himself to glances full of meaning and nasty little questions very cleverly put, which indicated that the way the guests amused themselves in Grogan's house would be beyond printing by any newspaper, reputable or not.

He got no change out of Grogan though, and privately I thought he was either a very stupid or a very brave coroner, because Henry Grogan can pull all kinds of strings and do very odd things, and I'm sure he hasn't a forgiving nature, and that coroner was very subtle and hinting about his relationship with Countess Orvini.

There was some very technical evidence from an expert in poisons and the findings of the autopsy, and it seemed very clear to everyone that Lila had taken the poison some time before she died, and the capsule was of a kind that took a long time to dissolve. And the police asked for an adjournment and the coroner granted it. Reluctantly, I

thought. He would have liked to go on for quite a time making enquiries about Grogan's guests and their amusements.

At least everything was well organised to protect us from the attentions of the Press. We were swept down in two large cars, both boasting a chauffeur and a Plug Ugly. At least, only one of the original Plug Ugliers, but a new one had materialised from somewhere or other. And all any press photographers got were good pictures of them, because they herded us neatly in and blocked all the view. They were there when we came out and we were neatly hustled into the cars and swept away again.

Ambrose was in one car with Dumont and Duncan Carstairs, and I was in the other with Henry Grogan, Edward Collingwood and Mark. Mark was very glittery about the eyes and twitchy about the hands, and Grogan snapped at him once or twice.

"I can't help it," said Mark. "It gets me sheer rattled. Darn it all, I was quite fond of Lila."

"You had a strange way of showing it," said Edward unpleasantly.

"Say, what do you mean by that?" demanded Mark angrily. "That's a fine sort of thing to say. I sure was fond of her."

"What he means," said Grogan, with a devastating candour, "is that he used to win money from her by cheating at cards."

"Oh, gee now," protested Mark with a whining note in his voice, "that's not true. I nearly always lost. You know that, Mr Grogan."

"Don't argue," said Grogan with a quiet ferocity. "You won't play any more cards, that's all."

That was on the way to the inquest; on the way back

Mark was more glittery than ever. He seemed deeply impressed by the delayed action theory.

"Imagine," he said, "that if we'd only known we could have done something, used a stomach pump or something. It sure does make me feel sore to think I sat beside her for about half an hour, and all the time that pill was just dissolving. Gee, death was sitting right next to me and I never knew it, never had a shiver. Gee, you'd think a guy'd have some kind of premonition about a thing like that . . . Gee!"

"Shut up," said Edward in a raw voice.

"Some guys," whined Mark, "just don't seem to have any feelings."

"Mark," said Grogan quietly. "I think we'd better have Farmisen down. You seem to be getting into a bad state."

Something in the way he said that gave me a creepy feeling, and Mark shut up and seemed to shrink. He muttered something under his breath, but after that he didn't say another word.

It looked as if the weather was breaking at last. Great clouds were piled up on the horizon and the afternoon was breathless. If there was going to be a thunderstorm I didn't think I could bear it. I'm scared of lightning.

When we got to the house Mark scurried out of the car and away, and Grogan looked after him with a curious, doubting look, almost a sad look.

"It's no use riding him, Edward," he said. "You know what he's like."

"He's a dangerous little psychopath," said Edward violently, and in his turn got out of the car and stalked almost violently away.

"Inquests," said Grogan thoughtfully, "seem to be the death of manners."

"Well, they're not very good for the nerves," I said.

He grinned at me disarmingly.

"Yours are pretty good," he said. "Come and have tea with Ambrose and me in my own room. We might have some peace there."

The other car drew up and Carstairs and Dumont got out and went off together. They made it very plain that Ambrose's company was extremely distasteful to them. Ambrose got out himself in a leisurely way, cocked his hat right down over his nose in the way he does when he's really pleased with himself and strolled towards us.

"I'm inviting you and Delia to tea," said Grogan amiably. "We seem to be an unpopular trio by the look of it. No one wants to speak to us."

"There is a certain amount of high tension about," Ambrose admitted. "Carstairs and Dumont appeared to think that I had the plague. Interesting, isn't it, how they won't let each other out of sight, and they loathe each other like sin."

Grogan shrugged. "They daren't lose sight of each other for a second," he said. "They don't trust each other. . . ."

Ambrose smiled seraphically. "Yes," he said, "they alibi one another, don't they? Oh, well. I'll go and change into something cool and then I'll join you for tea. Delia, you look as if you were going to burst! What's the matter?"

Grogan gave that so unexpected and pleasant smile that made him suddenly likeable.

"The poor girl is longing to tell you about Mark Cobden's behaviour," he said. "That's all right. We'll both tell you over a cup of tea."

The cars had rolled off majestically and we were standing alone by the flight of stone steps that curved up to the house. In the sky the clouds were piling up and up, tinged

with shining scarlet against the deep blue of the sky. There was that awful expectant hush that hangs about before a storm, and I knew that the expectancy would be intensified every minute now, and that in some frightening way the expectancy was associated with all of us, with what was happening . . . something would happen to us too. . . .

"What about Jan," I asked suddenly. "Will she be all right?"

"For the moment," said Ambrose cheerfully. "By the way, Grogan, you know where the morphia went, don't you?"

"Mark," said Grogan irritably. "Jan must have been mad."

Ambrose shrugged in his turn. "Not mad, menaced," he said flatly. "Lila Orvini forced her to get it. You know that. I suppose there wasn't any in that infernal laboratory of yours which seems to have been equipped with every damn drug under the sun."

"No curare," said Grogan bleakly. "I removed the morphia myself. I didn't know which of them it was, Lila or Mark."

"Lila," said Ambrose brusquely. "Mark was a cover-up."

"He's a fool," said Grogan harshly and with pain almost.

"And a knave," said Ambrose.

He began to walk up the steps towards the front door. Grogan watched him for a few seconds and then looked at me.

"Why that young man hasn't been well and truly beaten before now I can't understand," he said thoughtfully. "He's quite intolerable sometimes."

"Almost always," I informed him.

I thought about what Ambrose had said between fits of

laughter about the sinister capsules in the bar, and some august faces being red over them, and in a way I felt relieved. Ambrose's sense of humour might be rather peculiar, but if he laughed about those particular capsules then they must have been quite harmless, and therefore it didn't matter that Edward Collingwood seemed to have been mixed up with them. I just didn't want Edward Collingwood to turn out to be a murderer, though why it should matter I really couldn't think.

As we walked along to his room Grogan's whole manner changed and became uncertain, that strange effect of effortless power vanished completely and he even looked nervous. As we turned out of the light spaciousness of the hall and into the little silent corridor that led to the room, he began to hurry, so that I had to scurry to keep up with him. It was a short corridor, but before we got to the room he had me vaguely nervous too, with a queer itch between the shoulder blades, as if I expected a knife in the back or something equally nasty. I was almost sure he felt the same. . . .

After all, even the most powerful tycoon can't do much against a thug with a knife. What I mean is, a tycoon can smash business rivals, and even sway politicians and buy almost anything, but any mental deficient with a blunt instrument who slugs him on the head is a match for him. It's a very sobering sort of thought and tycoons should keep it in mind. It looked as if that thought had come into Grogan's mind, and by the time we were in that pleasant safe room, I was rattled.

"Look," I said breathlessly, "have you got the wind up or anything?"

He looked at me—glared would be a better word—and said, "Why do you ask?"

"I just thought you might have," I told him meekly.

Meekly because that cold blue glare was very daunting, and, after all, it was a stupid thing for me to have said.

"You thought right," he said grimly.

That made me feel quite peculiar. I mean, I hadn't expected him to admit it, and it made everything even more confused and demented.

"What about?" I asked.

He gave a shuddery sort of smile. It gave me the shivers, but probably Ambrose would have known what to do about it. I didn't. I don't know what was the matter with me, but I burst into tears.

He paid no attention at all, but rang a bell and after a minute Janet appeared.

"Tea, Janet," he said. "Plenty of it, and strong. For three. How's Miss Faversham?"

"Asleep," said Janet in a disapproving tone. "The doctor gave her another injection. That new nurse is with her."

In a way I was so surprised to see her answer the bell, and also at the way she didn't pay any attention to me sobbing, that I stopped.

"Don't be silly, Janet," said Grogan. "It's much better that she's kept quiet until all this is over. You know how hysterical she is."

"I know well," said Janet tersely. "And it does her no good to have these drugs. It's common sense she wants round her, and quietness. I've always said so."

"Once this is over," said Grogan irritably, "perhaps we will have some peace and quiet."

"If you all treat her as a wilful child," said Janet, "then she'll behave like one. She's got to face life herself, and well you know that."

"Go and get the tea," said Grogan.

Janet looked grim and marched out of the room.

Grogan looked at me, and gave a slightly sardonic grin. "Recovered?" he asked.

"Thank you," I answered with dignity. "By the way, is it usual for females to be weeping in your room that servants don't even notice it?"

"If my servants got into a state of excitement about everything that happened in this house," he said sourly, "they'd be in a perpetual state of goggle-eyed curiosity. It's part of their job not to show interest or surprise."

"Not even about murder?" I asked.

"They haven't had a murder before," he said equably. "And I must say they've taken it very well."

"Don't you mind about Lila being murdered?" I asked suddenly.

I don't know why I asked it, but I had at that moment a most unexpectedly sympathetic feeling for Lila. She had been most painfully and suddenly catapulted out of life, and a split second before that happened she had been strong and vivid and dominant, and now in only a few days she was nothing. All she meant to anyone was a problem to be solved. Let's, for heaven's sake, find out who killed her so that we can get on with our lives again. I had a vision of Lila drifting farther and farther away, becoming more and more transparent and wraith-like every minute, and utterly incapable of making any impression at all. And that to Lila would be hell. Literally. A much more imaginable sort of hell than flames and eternal gnawing worms and that sort of thing. For that matter it would be an eternally gnawing worm to Lila if she couldn't make any impression any more.

But all Grogan said was, "It depends on who murdered her."

I wondered who he was thinking of. Jan? It would be

awful if it had to be Jan. I could understand how he felt. Or Edward. I had a conviction that he would hate it to be Edward. But he wouldn't mind so long as it wasn't either of those two. Or Mark Cobden. He wouldn't want it to be Mark. And that was not so easy to understand, because really Mark was a beastly little psychopath as Edward had said.

Impulsively, before I had time to think what I was saying, I exclaimed, "But neither Edward nor Jan would try to kill anyone else to cover up what they'd done. They're not like that."

"Oh wise young judge," he said in a very tired way. "You have no idea to what lengths people will go to save their own lives, or their pride even."

I knew Ambrose would have been annoyed with me. 'Well,' I thought, 'why did he have to go changing his suit instead of staying by me, and stopping these things happening?'

Just then Ambrose turned up. He had put on his Palm Beach jacket, and his hair was shining and wet and smarmed down.

"I had a quick swim," he announced happily.

And in the next breath—"I just met Sergeant Fletcher. Jan wasn't thorough enough when she emptied the capsules down the closet. She must have been in some kind of flap and three or four of them missed the pan and rolled into a corner. The indefatigable Rose discovered them and gave them to young Cobden. She seems to have been in love with him. He kept them for some reason, but just now, after the inquest, he appears to have been seized with alarm and contrition and handed them over to the police, taking great care to explain that he knows for a fact that Edward Collingwood left them in the bar, before dinner on Saturday

night. Fletcher, full of zeal, has sent them straight to the County Analyst."

To my amazement and horror, Grogan made a choking sound and collapsed into a chair. He put his face in his hands and began to shake violently. He made little, almost hysterical, whoops.

"Poor Edward," he said at last, and looked up.

His face was quite contorted and tears sprang out of his eyes.

"Poor Edward," said Ambrose, and he also began to shake and his face crumpled up.

I realised with indignation that they were both quite overcome by hysterical laughter. They were giggling like a pair of demented schoolgirls.

"If this joke is not private," I said coldly, "I should like to laugh too."

"So you shall," said Ambrose shakily. "So you shall, my poor Delia. Only, for Edward's sake, keep it under your hat."

"Go on," I said crossly.

"Well, you know how thin Edward's hair is," said Ambrose.

"It's not particularly thin," I retorted.

"He thinks it's thin," said Grogan solemnly.

"It *is* thin," said Ambrose decisively. "And Edward was sensitive about it, so he dabbled in research. He had a theory that hair should be restored internally, not externally, and had a remedy with which he meant to experiment. He had put it up in those capsules . . . and left them in all innocence in the bar. Naturally, when Jan did her heroic destroying of evidence act, it seemed to Edward that, far from helping him, she had woven quite a few strands of a rope to put round his neck."

"Well, why didn't he go and tell the police?" I asked angrily. "It was the obvious thing to do."

I felt quite ill at the thought of Edward Collingwood being made to—to look so silly in front of everyone like this.

"Darling moppet," said Ambrose. "It's asking a lot of a man to go voluntarily to the police with a story like that. It sounds a bit far-fetched, don't you think? I think Edward hoped that nothing would be found out . . . and when he found the capsules had vanished, he didn't know what to think. He just hoped for the best."

Grogan nodded.

"Edward's sense of personal dignity is intense," he said. "He's so damned self-conscious that it's absurd. Our friend the Inferiority Complex magnified to the last degree. He can't even believe he's the important and genius of an economist that he is because he thinks he's an ineffectual and balding human being. It started when he was very young . . . and Jan leaving him didn't help."

"But he must be potty," I said without thinking. "He's very attractive!"

Ambrose raised both eyebrows in the most infuriating way, and Grogan looked over at me and said, "Persuade him of that, and you'll have achieved something."

At that moment Janet stalked in with the tea and set it out in a boding silence. Lightning darted out of her eyes and her lips were compressed.

No one paid any attention and she departed again, plainly with double umbrage on one shoulder and double dudgeon on the other.

"Act as hostess, please," said Grogan awkwardly.

I wanted to know what was going on in the rest of the house. Here in this small enclosed room I got a touch of claustrophobia. But I wasn't going to let either of them

know that, and I went up to the table where the massive silver tray was, and began to pour out tea. Something had got to happen soon, I thought nervously. Things couldn't go on like this. We couldn't all be kept here indefinitely. If the police couldn't find out in the next few days they'd have to let us all go.

I said so as I handed Ambrose his tea.

"Good Lord, moppet," said Ambrose. "We're all free to go any time. Probably the police might cavil if any of us tried to leave England, but we can all go back to our own homes and continue our natural avocations, while the police continue theirs, which is to keep an eye on us and find out who murdered Lila Orvini."

"Then why don't we go?" I asked.

"We don't go because of our insatiable curiosity," said Ambrose.

I wanted to say that I didn't suffer from that curiosity, but I couldn't really say so with truth. In one way I wished to go away and leave it all, and not have anything more to do with it. I wanted to believe that I didn't care who had poisoned Lila, that I didn't want them caught. But something inside me, something tiresome and puritanical, wouldn't let me. Ordinarily I would have had a sneaking sympathy with anyone who had done it, if they had been someone who had been driven beyond endurance and had madly, on impulse, pushed some poison into her drink, and then been sick with fear of being found out. But this was different really. Whoever had done it, had thought it out. They hadn't done it on impulse. They had known about capsules that took time to dissolve . . . they'd planned the time factor, and had the capsule and the poison. And then . . . they were prepared to go on killing.

I wondered if Plug-Ugly Smithers had been doped with

morphia. The morphia that Jan had been blackmailed into getting. If so, it looked like Mark Cobden. But I had the feeling that it wasn't as simple as that. It was an inverted, subtle clue, like those complicated clues in crosswords. They looked obvious, but they meant something quite different.

"And the others," said Ambrose, "don't go away because they daren't. They're all involved in some sort of skulduggery, and they don't know which one of them did it. They can't leave. . . . Haunting the scene of the crime, if you see what I mean?"

I saw what he meant clearly enough, and I didn't like it.

"Shall we stop discussing it for a while," Said Grogan. "It gets us nowhere. Shall we discuss the Tintoretto? I am interested in that. Once this is cleared up, I shall deal with that matter."

His face closed up and became sharp and bitter, with a blue glint of implacability in his narrow eyes. In the dim light of the room his red hair shone almost balefully, like flames, as if it had some secret source of incandescence.

"Will you now?" said Ambrose.

He sounded as lazy as ever, but I caught a different timbre in his voice, a dangerous thinness, mocking and slightly contemptuous.

"Naturally," said Grogan acridly.

"Naturally," said Ambrose. "You were deceived. Grogan the expert . . . Grogan, the infallible. It must hurt."

"It does hurt," said Grogan with a cold candour. "It annoys me. If Jan had asked for . . ."

His voice stopped abruptly.

"If she'd asked for money you'd have given it to her," said Ambrose gently. "Surely you would have, and made her squirm and agonise, made her do obeisance. Surely you would have."

There was a horrid little silence, and I wished someone would switch on the lights, because out of the window all one could see was a patch of dark gauzy sky, and those piled clouds, sulphurous now, and tinged with blood-red and emerald. And the whole air was still, as if the world was holding its breath.

"Go on," said Grogan acridly. "Say your say. I paid you to come here and say it."

"So you did," said Ambrose in tones of faint surprise, as if he had not thought of it before. "Well . . . you'd have given Jan money if she'd asked you for it. But she wouldn't ask, and you knew that, and you hated it. You *wanted* her to ask."

"Go on," said Grogan.

I did the most ridiculous thing. I moved ever so casually round the tea table to about a foot from where Grogan sat. I'd made up my mind that if he attacked Ambrose I'd snatch up the heavy silver teapot and hit him hard with it on the head. I was quite determined to.

"She couldn't ask anyway," said Ambrose, in the most matter-of-fact way in the world. "Lila saw to that. It wouldn't have suited Lila for Jan to ask you for the money. It wouldn't have amused her so much."

"Merriman," said Grogan, "stop stalling and come to the point. Why did Jan join in a conspiracy to defraud me?"

"Because if she refused, Lila would have informed you, *and* the police, that Jan had bigamously married Edward Collingwood, having been married when she was seventeen to Pierre Dumont."

"Don't be damn silly," said Grogan in a harsh, rough voice. "Jan married Edward straight from Dramatic School, and from her father's rectory."

"Exactly," said Ambrose. "But when Jan was seventeen and working on the land, she met Pierre Dumont, who was then supposed to be a ship-wrecked Norwegian, called Berulf Berulfsen. He was convalescing at that home run by Lady Merial Cantorlin. It was closed up later, and Lady Merial went inside under 18b. In the meantime, Berulf Berulfsen had gone off bravely to sea again, his ship was torpedoed and he was reported missing, believed killed. In fact, he was picked up by his friends the Nazis in their submarine, and that was that. How he reappeared in England some years later as a Free French, I leave to our Security chaps to explain. But appear he did. However, he did not look up his former wife for obvious reasons. But he met Lila . . . and finally he met Jan through Lila . . . and you through them both. And then it was easy, wasn't it?"

"Was it?" said Grogan, in a slow, incredulous voice. "Was it?"

"Easy," said Ambrose. "Jan fell utterly under Dumont's spell again. It happens, you know. She married him secretly when she was desperately romantic and impressionable and then he was away, and reported lost in the most heroic circumstances. She meets him again. You may be sure he had some very cast-iron and romantic explanation of now being Pierre Dumont, and she is filled with a sense of guilt and unfaithfulness. And immediately she is at his feet, begging forgiveness, hating herself for her lack of faithfulness, for marrying Edward. . . . She is a romantic, you know. Probably she longs to proclaim her fault to the world, to chastise herself. But that won't do. Dumont can't have it. He is here under a false name, on some heroic and dangerous mission. She can't indulge in her desire to confess and make all right. And then Lila steps in. She has them both in the hollow of her hand. So it seems. But

money must be obtained. Or else! What easier. Sell Grogan a faked Tintoretto. A brilliantly faked Tintoretto! Who can do that best? Carstairs. He's done it before. Not for any dishonest purpose, but when he was a student in Paris. He did it for a bet. Carstairs' tragedy is that he is a brilliant copyist, a brilliant faker, but he can't make anything really creative. Right! Carstairs is sunk in love for Jan. Grovelingly, desperately in love. For Jan he fakes the Tintoretto. He probably gets no cash out of it. He just does it. Lila tells you this Tintoretto is to be obtained, but the owner does not know its value. The owner being Dumont. Right. Mr Henry Grogan, conscienceless collector, is prepared to buy the Tintoretto from the unsuspecting owner for a sum far below its real value, but fairly high all the same. The owner won't sell. He wants to give it to Jan Faversham, for whom he has a platonic, but artistic admiration. But Jan refuses it, so reluctantly he sells. Lila gets most of the money. Dumont the remainder, and Jan Faversham and Carstairs hold the baby. Don't forget that the story was that Dumont originally took the picture from Carstairs in payment of a debt."

Grogan said nothing, but I said gloomily, "Then there's no real reason why Dumont should have murdered Lila. I mean . . . he hadn't any kind of grievance."

"It looks like it, doesn't it. Moppet," said Ambrose sympathetically. "It looks as if he's right in the clear."

"In the clear all round," said Grogan. "I can't get him without getting Jan and that oaf Carstairs."

"Oh," I said quickly, "that's nice of you. I mean . . . I didn't really think you'd want to slam Jan and Duncan Carstairs. I mean . . . they were so horribly caught up, weren't they? And Lila and Dumont just weren't caught up at all, they both of them just hadn't any feelings at all."

"Dumont's not getting away with my money," said Grogan.

"I don't see how you'll stop him," said Ambrose. "He can claim he was taken in by Carstairs . . . anyway, if you go for him, Jan and Carstairs are accessories. No getting away from it."

"We'll see," said Grogan.

I wanted to know something, and I wanted to know it badly. It was important to me, in a way.

"Is Edward still in love with Jan?" I asked firmly.

"There's a question!" said Ambrose.

"How do I know?" said Grogan impatiently. "What I want to know is who poisoned Lila. That's all. And precisely why. That damned housemaid with her story about Jan sneaking into the laboratory. What if she did?"

"Everybody hopped in and out of that laboratory," said Ambrose coldly. "It stinks. What the devil did you think you were doing, making all that stuff free to your guests?"

Grogan stood up slowly. In the dusk I could only see the bright glint of his eyes, and his face a pallor beneath that curious flambeau of hair.

"What did I care if they doped themselves to hell?" he asked calmly. "They were that kind. Amusing, some of them. Dead depraved bores, the others. But they amused me. They thought themselves so much too good for me, so intellectual compared with the moronic financier, take him for a ride, get what you can out of him. Food, drink, booze. I didn't mind. They were relaxation. I studied them. I'd had to make my money, I'd starved, I'd climbed. I'd worked. But not them. They had the impertinence to despise me. So let them debauch themselves, let them soak and batten and scrounge. I could watch them do it, but I didn't have to do it myself. If they hadn't got it out of my

laboratory, they'd have got it from somewhere else. Probably paid bad types like Dumont to get it for them."

"Feel that way about Lila?" asked Ambrose placidly.

Grogan didn't answer at once. It was very quiet in the small room. But through the open window, tender and nostalgic, came the sound of Peter's guitar.

"Lila was a tramp," said Grogan. "Oddly enough, because I'd known her as a grubby, thrusting sort of kid—thrusting like myself—I still saw her that way. I'd changed, but I didn't think she had. She was still showing off, dancing to the hurdy-gurdy . . . wanting to get somewhere. I'd got somewhere. . . . What I didn't see was that she'd got somewhere, too. She'd got where she was meant to get, or meant herself to get. She'd changed, too. But I don't like the chap who killed her. She may have deserved it. But I don't like him."

"Nor do I," said Ambrose. "He didn't kill her for the right reasons. But that's beside the point."

"Good hunting," said Grogan.

"Thanks," said Ambrose. "But Janet's right about one thing. It's no good that medico of yours keeping Jan under drugs. Jan's got to come to properly and face things."

"Face having been married to Dumont?" enquired Grogan.

"Why not?" said Ambrose. "She married him, didn't she? Does Edward know?"

"If he did," I pointed out, "he'd have been more likely to eliminate Dumont than Lila."

"You've got something there, my little moppet," said Ambrose. "Hollow's coming up here tonight, Grogan, he's got some bee in his bonnet. March is going back to London—he's got some things to investigate there. By the way, you needn't worry about Dumont. March will cope with him."

"I should be delighted to know that someone was coping with the whole affair," said Grogan. "But I'm damned if I can see how they can find out who switched those capsules. There was plenty of cyanide in the lab. . . . and plenty of capsules. It could have been taken any time."

"I'll give March a week," said Ambrose, "and after that it can sink into the limbo of unsolved cases."

Janet came into the room. She began to pick up the tea things, her face set and unfriendly. As she got back to the door, she said, "Mr Carstairs wants to speak to Miss Brown."

"Go and talk to him, moppet," said Ambrose. "He might want to confess."

"Carstairs," said Grogan gloomily, "is the one person who has never had a chance to get near the laboratory."

"Then obviously," said Ambrose briskly, "he's our favourite suspect according to all the detective yarns."

I looked at Grogan aggressively.

"Can I tell him that you're not going to try and put him in prison?" I demanded.

"Tell him that if he likes to tell the truth, it'll be best," said Ambrose hastily.

"Where is he?" I asked Janet.

"In the bar," said Janet with pronounced disapproval.

"With Peter?" I asked with amazement.

"Aye," said Janet, and departed.

"That's all right," said Grogan sardonically. "Peter has a civilised outlook on life, which is more than can be said about most English people."

"I agree with that," I said, and without any further hesitation went out of the room.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

DUNCAN was in the bar just as Janet had said, but he was drinking iced coffee. There was no sign of Dumont, and for that I was duly thankful. If anyone could scare me, it was Pierre Dumont.

"Hullo," said Duncan in a matter-of-fact voice. "Nice to see you. I've just been apologising to Peter, if that will make you any more friendly."

"I've never been unfriendly," I told him.

Which was true really.

"Well, come into the garden," he suggested.

I looked out at the thunderous, coppery light, and shook my head.

"No thanks," I said. "I'm a coward about thunderstorms even before they begin."

"Oh well," said Duncan. "It doesn't matter really. Peter seems to know all about most things for that matter. What I wanted to say was that Dumont has sloped off."

"Sloped off?" I echoed stupidly. "But where to?"

"Back to my cottage, he said," Duncan answered. "But I doubt it myself. I think he's bolted. He's got the wind up suddenly, and I don't know why."

"I shouldn't think he could get far," I said. "The whole place is crammed with police; at least they're lurking all round the grounds."

"Mr Dumont is, I think, very expert at escaping," said Peter gently. "I think he has escaped often from places."

"The thing is," said Duncan miserably. "Ought I to tell

Hollow or that chap Fletcher? It's rather like informing, you know. But I've got a hunch that—that he's dangerous."

And he added, while he stared gloomily at the darkening garden, "He's a queer type. Utterly unscrupulous."

"I'd tell Hollow if I were you," I said.

Because I too had a hunch that Pierre was dangerous. And I had a hunch that he hadn't gone very far and might come back for something. Maybe it was an absurd and fantastic idea, but I had it just the same, and it gave me the jitters to think of Dumont hidden somewhere, perhaps in the house, and then prowling about in the middle of the night.

"Oh well," said Duncan, and shrugged slightly. "I'm for the high jump anyway, might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb."

He slid off the tall stool and shook himself.

"You might not be," I said. "But if you're going to tell anything, it's got to be everything and absolutely true. Even about Jan's share."

He scowled deeply.

"Look here," he said, with a swift return to morose gloom. "What are they doing to Jan up there? Why can't anyone see her? I don't like it."

"Only keeping her safe and quiet," I said firmly. "She's all right really, I'm going up to see her. Do you want me to give her a message?"

Duncan hesitated, and I wondered how much he really knew about Jan. Whether he had any idea about Pierre Dumont.

"Just give her my love," he said at last, "and tell her to buck up."

That seemed about all that could be said, and he again shrugged and began to walk away.

"Come and visit me in Brixton," he said over his shoulder.

Peter ran a soft, tuneful little tremolo on his guitar, and Duncan laughed suddenly and went out of the bar.

"He is a good young man, really," said Peter to no one in particular.

"I suppose so," I said.

Everything was dank and depressing. Inside me I didn't want to know who'd used that poison, because it might be anyone. Just anyone. I wished I felt brave and intelligent, and could do something quick and decisive, and that I was quite, quite sure that it wasn't any of the people I liked. And I couldn't be sure of that. As Ambrose said, one had to be absolutely open-minded and unprejudiced in a thing like this, one had to realise that the nicest people sometimes did the most awful things if they were frightened enough or desperately unhappy.

Well, the best thing to do was to act always, not to moon about, speculating and brooding. I would go and see Jan, I decided, and make sure she really was all right. There was a relentlessness about the way she was being kept so quiet, and so drugged. Keeping her drugged was a good way of making sure she could do or say nothing dangerous, wasn't it? If she did say anything, no one would take any notice, they'd just think she was talking nonsense under the drug. If it went on long enough she might really go a bit crazy, crazy enough to be put into a home, where no one would ever take anything she said seriously. I didn't like that doctor much, and the only comforting part about it was that Ambrose had obviously had a long talk with her before I went, and saw her this morning, and he'd be on her side.

There was Janet, too. Janet, who had been Edward's old

nurse. Janet was on her side, and Janet would create a riot if anyone tried to do anything to hurt her.

There was no sign of Ambrose as I went along, but Hollow came out of the 'Inquisition Chamber' and gave me a melancholy, but friendly smile. I was glad to see him about. I had quite an affection for him.

I saw that he was making for the small room where one of the many telephones resided, and I guessed he was putting people onto Dumont's trail. I hoped very much that quite soon we should hear that that one was safely locked up in a cell. Probably there were lots of things he could be locked up for. Firstly, it looked as if he had no right to be in England at all.

When I got to Jan's room the new nurse opened the door in answer to my knock. She was very different from the other one, and I hated her just as much. This one was broad-shouldered and very dark. There was a big mole on her chin with a whisker growing out of it, and she had round cat's eyes. She looked strong too, as if she could deal with refractory patients by physical force.

"Miss Faversham can't be disturbed," she said flatly.

"Mr Grogan particularly asked me to come and see her," I said, equally flatly.

"Just now she is sleeping," said the nurse. "Perhaps later."

Just then, however, Jan's voice sounded.

"I'm not asleep," she said. "And I want to see Miss Brown."

Usually I'm not very good at barging past people, but I barged past that nurse like a Rugby player, and once in the room I was determined not to be ejected except by main force, and if anyone tried that I was going to scream blue murder.

The nurse glared at me and muttered something about telling the doctor, and at that I went a little berserk.

"Tell him what you like," I said. "And then see what Mr Grogan tells him. I understand very well about it all, I'd have you know."

It worked. It worked almost frighteningly well. The nurse went a dull red and then went pale. She looked ugly and angry, but she looked quelled as well, so I must have hit the target by pure chance. There *was* something fishy going on about Jan.

Jan looked pale and puffy round the eyes, but more together. She seemed a bit swimmy with sedative, or whatever those injections were, but not so frightened any more. She smiled faintly at me, and then, without paying any attention to the nurse, said, "Sit down, darling, I'm terribly glad to see you."

I didn't see how I was going to do much good with that nurse around, but Jan rang a push-button bell on her bedside table, and an arrogant look came into her eyes and curled the corners of her mouth.

"We shan't need you, Nurse," she said coldly.

"I'm sorry, Miss Faversham," said the nurse blandly. "But my instructions are that you must not be left alone."

"I am not alone," Jan pointed out.

"I have my orders," said the nurse impertinently.

Janet came into the room at that moment, in answer to the bell, presumably.

"Get that nurse out of here," said Jan sharply, "or else go and get Henry Grogan up here. He can tell that doctor that his services are not required any longer, nor those of his nurse."

"Now then, now then," said the nurse, with an odious,

oily authority. "We mustn't excite ourselves or we shall have another injection."

I was certain then that she was used to dealing with mental cases, and equally and horribly sure that she was used to manhandling them if necessary.

"Like hell we will," said Jan with an unexpected energy. "Janet, get Mr Grogan for me, will you?"

Janet nodded grimly, as if she knew exactly what the nurse was, and said, "Perhaps Miss Brown wouldn't mind fetching Mr Grogan, while I stay here with you."

"Oh, darling Janet, will you?" said Jan fervently.

It was so obvious that she far preferred Janet, that I found myself feeling disgruntled, even while I realised quite clearly that it was very sensible of her. I couldn't really have stopped that nurse doing anything, but Janet could and would. By physical force if necessary. And I would back Janet, tough and bony and fighting fit, even against that beastly woman.

"I'll fetch him," I said and hurried out of the room.

I hoped that Ambrose would still be with Grogan and would come up with us and see fair play. I wasn't at all sure in my own mind that Grogan would be on Jan's side. He was so peculiar about her. One moment and he seemed almost to be terrifically fond of her in a funny way, and then he'd say or do something that made you feel he disliked and distrusted her. He was the same about Edward. He never said anything against him; on the contrary, he always spoke as if he was absolutely on his side and, like a flash it came to me just what he did do about Edward. He denied so resolutely that Edward could possibly have anything to do with Lila Orvini that it sounded simply fine, but he did it in such a way that he gave the impression he was shielding him. Perhaps, I thought irritably, Ambrose

could tell what he really meant, but I was purely bewildered . . . and distrustful.

Ambrose was still there. He and Grogan were playing chess of all things!

I burst in, and Grogan's head snapped round and his eyes went that blazing blue that meant he was furious.

"What the devil . . .?" he began, when Ambrose interrupted placidly.

"Obviously something important," he remarked.

And then to me, "Delia, people don't come into this room without a definite invitation. Apologise."

"Sorry," I said abruptly. "But it's urgent. Mr Grogan, will you please come up to Jan, that foul nurse is threatening her, and you've got to do something."

"Do what?" asked Grogan, and his cold, beastly superior grin curled his mouth.

"Get rid of the nurse," I told him furiously. "She's a beastly woman and that doctor must be beastly too, to send a woman like that."

"Dear Delia," said Ambrose in an odd, amused voice. "The complete diplomat!"

It wasn't plain what really amused him, whether it was me or Henry Grogan, and it didn't matter in the least at that instant, because I was furious myself, furious and frightened. Not of Grogan, although there was something in the paleness of his face and the way his nostrils flared that *was* frightening; but for Jan. I knew now for sure how he felt about her. He hated her and he knew just what the nurse was like, and he'd meant it to be that way.

Ambrose didn't seem to notice anything at all. He seemed to be entirely on Grogan's side, because after a long pause, and before Grogan relaxed enough to speak, he said, "Don't be so ridiculous, ducks. Jan Faversham is wildly

neurotic. You must have noticed it. She's got to be protected from herself."

I wanted to yell at him, and it's not natural for me to want to yell. I hate scenes and raised voices and that sort of thing, but for him to talk like that, in that smug, idiotically insensitive way, was the end.

I didn't yell. I got cold and hateful.

"You must be losing your grip," I told him. "That nurse looks as if she might have been employed by the Nazis in a concentration camp."

He looked at me coldly and then shrugged slightly.

"Perhaps we'd better go up and see what's the matter," he suggested to Grogan.

I was so appalled by his perfidy, after he'd been so sickeningly buddies with Jan in the morning, leading her up the garden and pretending that she could rely on him, and on me, that I couldn't utter.

"Can't interfere with Manson's arrangements," said Grogan curtly. "He expected some development of this sort . . . some delusion, even mania. He considers Jan manic-depressive."

I wasn't sure what manic-depressive meant. It sounded awful; but I didn't believe Jan was one. She might be neurotic or unstable or overwrought, but she wasn't insane. And now it was obvious they meant to bundle her off into a mental home. It was so easy. Just drive her into being completely overwrought and she'd give them every justification.

"Still, we'd better go along," said Ambrose casually. "Too much responsibility for the nurse if Jan's really manic . . . Delia here is as pigheaded as they come, and if there's a rumpus and Jan gets hurt or anything, Delia would go battling off and swear the nurse had done something

diabolical. Better have some independent evidence, don't you think?"

"Delia is being tiresome and childish," said Grogan calmly. "Very well, we'll go up. I'll get Cobden to contact Manson first. We'd better have him here in case of need."

"Janet is equally pigheaded," I said furiously. "And she'll battle too. Luckily she's up there now, so that beastly nurse won't have a chance to do anything."

"Is Janet up there?" said Grogan sharply. "Very well, we'll go up."

He appeared to forget he'd been going to make Mark contact the doctor, and I thought with a quite vicious triumph that he didn't like that. I guessed he'd been playing for time, thinking that Jan was there alone and that by the time we got up there the nurse would have dealt quite successfully with her.

Grogan stalked out ahead of us and Ambrose nudged my elbow and said quickly, "Atta girl, my moppet. Full marks."

Why the slightest sign of approval from Ambrose should make me feel warm and elated is a mystery. It's really rather humiliating to be dependent on another person's good opinion to such an extent; but that's the way it is with me, and I followed Grogan down the passage with an absurd and pleased smile on my face.

Hollow was in the hall; just dawdling apparently, and when he saw us he looked more mournful than ever.

"Superintendent March is arriving in about twenty minutes, Sir," he said to Grogan. "He'd like to have a word with you."

"The only word I'd like from him," said Grogan acidly, "would be the name of the murderer."

"Quite," said Hollow, without batting an eye.

He wasn't looking at Grogan, however, he was looking at Ambrose. I daren't watch Ambrose myself, because Grogan, who had stopped when Hollow spoke to him, was looking at me with an unpleasant air of dislike, so I looked back at him defiantly. I had an inkling that Ambrose might want to convey some kind of hint to Hollow to stand by for trouble. Nothing could be more comforting than to know that Hollow was in the offing if the Grogan-Manson-Cobden gang had any plans for fixing Jan Faversham. It was quite sickening to remember that only a short time ago I'd begun to like Henry Grogan and think I'd misjudged him.

When we started up the stairs I registered a resolution that if anything tough was done to Jan, I'd simply yell blue murder, and that would bring Hollow up to us. He wasn't the sort of man to be easily bamboozled into mistaking hysteria for manic-depression, or whatever it might be.

Jan was sitting bolt upright when we came into her room, and she didn't look in the least manic or even hysterical. She looked slightly contemptuous and very calm.

Janet was standing very near to the nurse. Her back was as straight as a ramrod, and her hands were clasped formally across her flat stomach. The nurse looked slightly dishevelled and her cap was crooked. I wondered with a distinctly inappropriate glee whether she had had a tussle with Janet.

"Hullo, Henry," said Jan in her usual, deep and husky voice. "Will you oblige me by dismissing that nurse and informing Doctor Manson that I don't require his services any longer. I am getting up."

"You can't do that, my dear," said Grogan with incisive authority. "We'll get Manson, and if he says you're all right, then it will be splendid."

"I refuse to see Doctor Manson," said Jan flatly. "And kindly get that nurse out of my room. Janet can look after me."

I wondered whether Ambrose had put her up to this when he had talked to her this morning. He was quite capable of it and, after all, this morning she had been making quite a lot of sense, so why on earth should she have needed that dragoon of a nurse and more injections?

"Don't be a fool," said Grogan stonily.

It looked as if we had arrived at a deadlock, when there was a knock at the door, and when Janet opened it, Hollow was outside with March.

They both looked very grave and embarrassed, and my heart dropped like a dead weight.

"What the devil do you want?" asked Grogan angrily.

They paid no attention, but somehow came into the room without seeming to make any effort.

March was looking at Jan, who stared back at him defiantly.

"Janice Faversham," he said steadily. "I have a warrant for your arrest and I am charging you with the murder by poison of Countess Lila Orvini."

Just for a second Jan looked petrified, and then to my horror she laughed shortly.

"Thank you, Superintendent," she said loudly. "Just give me time to dress. At least I shall feel better in a cell than in this house."

"It's insane," said Grogan. "Don't hurry, Jan, I'll get Manson and my solicitor. You can't be moved."

"Don't bother, Henry," she said. "I'm not wanting anything from you. Not anything at all."

"Superintendent," said Grogan steadily, "Miss Faversham is in a very peculiar state of mind. I insist . . ."

"I'm sorry," said March, "but there's nothing you can do about this. Miss Faversham can have all the medical attention she wishes. . . ."

From somewhere in the background a policewoman appeared, a tall, competent looking woman with quite a pleasant face. Obviously she intended to be present while Jan got dressed.

"Merriman," said Grogan in a coldly furious tone, "this is an outrage. They've gone out of their minds."

"They must have good reasons," said Ambrose mildly. He glanced at Jan.

"If there's anything you'd like me to do," he said gently.

"Yes, please," she answered quite calmly. "Please break this to Edward yourself . . . oh, and to poor Duncan. And ask Edward to send Mr Dale to me as quickly as possible."

She paid no further attention to Henry Grogan, but held out her hand to Janet, who stood quite still with a stricken look, and whose face was working painfully.

"Darling Janet," she said. "Don't worry. It will be all right. I'm quite sure it will be all right in the end. I didn't do it, you know. No matter how things may appear, I promise you I didn't do it."

"Come along," Ambrose said to me quietly. "There's nothing you can do. Come along."

There was a moment's silence and then rain spattered against the windows. The storm was starting with a dramatic sense of timing, and suddenly I couldn't bear it any more. I hurried out of the room and began to run towards my own bedroom. Ambrose came after me and caught hold of my arm.

"Now don't you go all hysterical," he said sharply. "That won't help in any way. I'll be along as soon as I can. Stay in your room and wait for me."

"She—she seemed to expect it," I muttered miserably. "She—she didn't seem surprised. It's awful."

"She was surprised all right," he said grimly. "And she put up a damned good show. Now don't panic. I won't be long."

The curtains were already drawn close in my room, and a pile of beautifully laundered undies laid on my bed. Evidently the super service still went on in this incredible and horrible house. I hated the house now and realised suddenly that I'd been growing to hate it steadily for the last two days. It was full of beastliness. Chock full. Full of horrible, calculating people. . . .

Everything was silent except for the rain, which was coming down heavily now, and I found myself waiting for the first roll of thunder. I lay down on the bed and lit a cigarette and tried to sort out all the confusing things that had happened, and went on happening. London seemed far away and as if it didn't exist. Of course, it was possible that Jan Faversham really had deliberately changed that capsule. She obviously had the strongest possible motive; and the police didn't arrest people for murder without the strongest possible grounds. I knew that well enough. Only I couldn't imagine Jan doing it that way, though I could have imagined her snatching up a knife or a revolver and going berserk.

I began to get all muddled again. Perhaps, after all, Henry Grogan had wanted her kept under sedatives, and the impression given to people that she was a little mad in order to protect her. So that if the worst came to the worst she could be declared insane. Perhaps I'd been misjudging him after all. I'd been thinking that it was so that she couldn't tell the police anything that might involve him.

And then suddenly I thought of Pierre Dumont and wondered where he really was, and whether she knew he had done it, and because she was so dreadfully in love with him would prefer to be accused herself rather than have anything happen to him. The things women did when they were absolutely submerged in love were unbelievable really.

My bedroom door opened softly and Mark Cobden slid round it. I sat up indignantly, but before I could speak, he shook his head sadly and said, "Gosh, I had to come and talk to someone human. This is too darn awful. I can't take it Jan! Jan being taken off and gaoled for murder. It's too God-awful!"

"I don't believe she did it," I said without thinking.

I'd meant to order him out, but of course now I'd said that the opportunity had gone, and he came and sat in the bedside chair and stared at me gloomily and with a touchingly young dejection.

"I know," he said. "I guess you just can't believe someone like her could do a thing like that. I guess you've just got to do something about it, but what? Grogan did his best. Tried to keep her out of it. . . ."

I didn't answer. Anyway, there wasn't anything to say, and I didn't want to discuss Grogan with him.

"Look," he said, "there isn't anyone'd be so low as to let her take the rap for something he'd done, do you think? I guess there isn't such a rat."

"I don't know," I told him gloomily. "There are rats about and often you don't recognise them."

"Grogan'll get her out of it," he said. "He'll raise all hell. He won't stand for a thing like that."

It wasn't quite convincing. It was as if he was trying to convince himself as well as me.

I thought for a minute and then I said, "This isn't

America. I don't mean to be rude, but you can't wangle English courts the way you seem to be able to do in the United States. I mean, getting endless adjournments and all kinds of appeals and things. All he can do is to get the best counsel and try and find who really did it."

He looked at me quickly.

"Maybe he doesn't want to do that," he said, and suddenly he looked sly and knowing.

But my brain was beginning to work again and I hardly noticed the low rumble of distant thunder. What was he hinting at? That Henry Grogan had done it? Anyway, I wasn't going to rise to that bait, and I wished he'd go away. He didn't look pathetic any longer, he looked almost cocky.

"I don't want to talk about it," I told him. "I've got a headache and I want to try and go to sleep."

"Poor kid," he said anxiously. "You sure have had enough to give anyone a headache. I'll tell you something. I'll get you a coupla pills. They're more than something for headaches, clear them up like a bomb. Specialite de la maison. I'll go fetch a couple."

"I don't want anything," I said vigorously.

It might be silly, but I wasn't taking any pills or capsules or anything else in this house.

"Sure, don't be a little dope," he said amiably. "I sure have no wish to poison you, if that's what's in your mind. These are just honest-to-God headache chasers . . . just the job."

He lounged out of the room and my heart began to beat madly. For a second I thought of jumping up and bolting the door, no matter how dramatic and stupid it would appear, but then my fatal upbringing intervened. That awful training never to do anything hysterical or dramatic.

But I was quite determined never to take those pills. Then an idea came to me and I rang the bell for the maid.

Bells were usually answered so promptly that you wondered whether the maid was wafted up by magic, but this time no one answered at all and I really began to panic, especially as the thunder was really getting into its stride and rumbling and muttering all round the sky.

I swung my feet over the side of the bed when the door opened again and Mark came in.

"Here you are," he said. "I'll get you a glass of water. You just swallow them."

They were cachets, they were gelatine capsules. I swallowed and my mouth went dry, while I shook my head obstinately.

"I don't want them," I insisted huskily.

Mark paid not the slightest attention and went into the bathroom to get the water. I rang the bell furiously again and kept my finger on the button.

This time it was answered and in about two minutes there was a tap on the door and a stocky dark girl appeared, looking faintly surprised.

"Yes Madam?" she said doubtfully.

I waited for Mark to come out of the bathroom, but he didn't appear and the tap wasn't running either. A hot feeling spread from behind my ears. This was ridiculous and humiliating. He was behaving as if . . . as if we were in a compromising situation. It was too infuriating. I felt my cheeks beginning to burn and then I simply felt good and mad.

"Why didn't you come when I rang the first time?" I asked in a loud clear voice.

She looked confused and awkward.

"I'm sorry, Madam," she said. "But it was Mr Cobden

. . . I met him as I was on my way and he told me it was a mistake, you'd wanted a message sent and he was taking it for you."

"Oh, did he?" I said. Well, Mr Cobden was mistaken himself. He wanted to give me some pills for a headache, but I don't need them. What I wanted you for is to go down and find Mr Merriman and tell him I must see him at once, it's very important. At once? . . ."

"Yes Madam," she said in a flurried way and scuttled out of the door.

Mark came out of the bathroom. He looked sulky and embarrassed.

"That sure was a cock-eyed thing to do," he said. "What's the idea? Trying to get me in wrong with Merriman?"

"I think it was extremely impertinent of you to tell the maid I didn't need her," I said coldly.

He began to walk towards the door, but I held out my hand and smiled at him sweetly.

"But you can leave me the headache chasers," I said. "I might need them later on tonight."

He gave a high, angry laugh and threw them on the bed.

"Sure," he said, "and if Merriman wants them analysed he can do so and welcome. I was only trying to help you."

He stalked out of the room and I didn't care. I was only too thankful to see him go, and I collected the two little gelatine capsules and put them in the ashtray on the bed table. Obviously there wasn't anything wrong with them or he wouldn't have left them behind. Just the same I wasn't running any risks and I'd give them to Ambrose and see what he thought about it. After all, if I'd really had a headache and had taken them, it would have created a precedent. I mean, he could have thought I'd have them

again if I had another headache, and then perhaps they mightn't have been so harmless. Besides, they were exactly the same shape and size as the one Lila had taken, and it seemed an awful risky thing in this house for people to have headache pills and poisons and hair restorers all made up in the same sort of containers. They might get mixed up somehow.

Ambrose rapped loudly on the door and came in.

"What's the matter?" he asked quickly.

I told him and he frowned pensively, picked up one of the capsules and stared at it.

Then he laughed under his breath.

"Oh, my comic moppet," he said. "What a delicious situation. But how right you were. I shouldn't have liked it at all if you'd popped into a deep sleep and not woken up. I'll have these little fellows given the once-over just the same. As you say he wouldn't have left them if they'd been full of deadly poison, but it's interesting, and as you so rightly say, with all these amateur chemists making up their prescriptions in these containers, anyone might easily make a mistake."

He dropped them into a cellophane envelope and I gazed at him with exaggerated admiration.

"Very professional," I said. "Have you got tweezers, too? For picking up single hairs and bits of fluff and all that?"

"Don't get above yourself," he admonished me blandly. "Just because, for once, you showed some initiative."

He sat down on the edge of the bed.

"You can ring again," he said. "I think we might have some alcoholic refreshment."

The bell was answered promptly and Ambrose beamed at the worried maid.

"It's all right," he said. "Will you ask Peter in the bar to bring us up two White Ladies? Ask him to bring them himself if it is convenient."

"Yes Sir," she said in a subdued voice.

"Afraid that some other person might drop a lethal dose into them on the way?" I asked cheerfully.

"Not exactly," he said, in a snubbing tone. "That wouldn't be very clever, do you think? Whoever brought them would find it hard to explain two resultant corpses, don't you think?"

"That's one point of view," I observed. "On the other hand, whoever brought them might put them down for a moment, or have their attention distracted in some way, and the assassin would just drop the dose in."

"You've been reading too many thrillers," he answered. "As a matter of fact, I wanted a word with Peter."

"Ambrose," I said urgently and irrelevantly, "have they got any really conclusive evidence against Jan Faversham?"

Ambrose pulled his cigarette case out of his pocket, and offered it to me.

"Plenty," he said laconically. "They've had it since the night Lila was killed."

"Then why didn't they do something right away?" I asked.

"They needed to check on quite a lot of other things and people," he said deliberately. "It looks as if she must have had an accomplice, you know."

He was talking as if there was no doubt about her guilt and my heart felt inexplicably heavy and forlorn, as if Jan was one of my oldest and best friends; which was foolish, because she wasn't anything to me at all really. Even now I wasn't sure whether I liked her or not. She wasn't the sort of person you'd just like. You'd either be terribly fond

of her or dislike her. I didn't dislike her, but I couldn't say I was terribly fond of her. It was just that I couldn't bear to believe she'd done anything so callous and thought out. I couldn't bear to believe she'd be sordid, and that capsule was sordid. Sordid and horrible.

"Why?" I asked, in as detached and investigating a manner as possible.

Ambrose raised one eyebrow in an irritating and superior fashion.

"Rose didn't like her. I don't see Rose conspiring with Jan to dope the Plug Ugly, do you? Much less bashing Rose on the head with intent to kill afterwards," said Ambrose.

"No," I agreed slowly. "No. But I don't see her having an accomplice, somehow. Or starting in to massacre people wholesale. Because you seem to think that someone meant to have a go at me that evening. Though I can't think why. I hadn't a clue about anything, I didn't know anything dangerous."

"Perhaps it wasn't you," he said lightly. "Perhaps it was Mark Cobden they were after."

"But . . ." I began, and stopped short.

The thing was I had a vague idea that Mark Cobden could have something to do with it himself, so why should it be him they wanted to silence?

"Cobden," Ambrose explained kindly, "is a snooper. And he knows all kinds of small things about what goes on. As a matter of fact, it was he who gave March one of the most damning items of evidence against Jan. He said that on the afternoon of the fatal night, Jan was in the laboratory fixing up some kind of sleeping stuff for herself, at least that's what she said she was doing, and she asked him how on earth one filled up those capsules and made the joint proof. He had to go and do some letters for Grogan and he left

her in the lab, and so she might easily have filled one with that infernal cyanide. What's more, he said, quite gratuitously, that just before dinner Jan picked up Lila's bag from a small table, opened it and fished in it for a second, and then shut it up again very quickly, looked round to see if anyone had noticed and put it down again as if it burnt her fingers."

"Snoopy little brute," I said indignantly. "Ambrose! Tell me something, was she talking to someone when she did it?"

"I don't know," he said, and looked at me with interest. "Why?"

"Well, it's the sort of thing one could do by accident," I pointed out. "One puts one's bag down for some reason, because one's using both hands or something, and one has it in one's mind that it's just beside one. And then, because you want a handkerchief or something, and if you're engrossed in conversation, it's quite easy just to reach down and pick it up, open it without looking and fish for a handkerchief or something. But the moment you felt the inside you'd know it wasn't yours, and of course you'd get an awful jolt and feel hideously embarrassed, and you'd do just what he says Jan did. Shut it quickly and put it down like a flash, and hope no one saw. I mean, you'd feel embarrassed and guilty just for doing such an idiotic thing. . . ."

Ambrose nodded. "That's true," he said. "But it's one among a number of other things, and it's the small things that add up, you know, if they all seem to point one way. Then, unfortunately, there was a note in Lila's room from Jan, a wild threatening note, dated in the afternoon."

"But if the police knew all that and believed it all," I insisted gloomily, "why did they wait all this time?"

"Oh," said Ambrose vaguely. "You know what they are! They like to check and then double-check on everything. They wouldn't go into court on Cobden's statement alone, if you see what I mean. . . ."

"Well, who else . . .?" I began indignantly.

"There was the note," he reminded me mildly. "It was very explicit. It was to the effect that rather than endure anything more from Lila she would be prepared to kill her, that it was preferable to hang than to endure such blackmail and that it would be a good deed to rid the world of anyone like Lila. Also Dumont, though with every appearance of great reluctance, said that Jan Faversham had been infatuated with him, that she knew he was having an affair with Lila, and had been quite unbalanced in her pursuit of him and her hatred of Lila. He also said that the day before the poker game, Jan had been enquiring about the effects of various poisons; and Rose, on the actual night of the murder, when interviewed by Fletcher, took him up to Jan's room and showed him a book on forensic medicine left in the bedside bookshelf with a marker in the cyanide and prussic acid section. By the way, Rose is recovering, though she can't talk much. . . ."

"But no one would be such a fool as to leave a book like that about if they meant to murder someone," I protested.

"Jan Faversham can be made to appear just such a fool," he said irritably. "Given a good prosecuting counsel and she can be made to appear a jealous, hysterical woman, blind to everything except her passion for revenge."

Something else struck me.

"But Dumont must be crazy," I said. "I should have thought that the last thing on earth he would want would be to get mixed up in it. I mean, you'd think he'd keep

very, very quiet indeed and hope no one would notice him much or link him with Jan in any way."

"The way I look at it," said Ambrose, "is that Dumont was in such a spot that he had to try anything. He might reckon that if Jan *did* by any chance start telling about him being Berulfesen, he could bluff it out as being delusional, the crazy story of an infatuated and unbalanced woman. He wanted her discredited anyway."

"But he's bolted," I said. "At least, Duncan Carstairs says he has."

"That's interesting," said Ambrose cheerfully. "Something must have put the wind up him badly."

"Well, I hope they catch him," I said viciously.

"Do you?" asked Ambrose. "It might be better for Jan if they didn't."

I could see what he meant, but I didn't agree. It would be better, I thought, to have it all thrashed out, about the marriage and everything. Even if it was bigamy on Jan's part. It hadn't been her fault.

"Peter hasn't brought those drinks," I said.

"Nor will he," said Ambrose. "That was only a way of sending him a message. He'd know what it meant."

He grinned at me affectionately. "You'd better brush your hair and wash your face and come along to the bar with me. We'll have one there."

He added, out of the blue, "We'll pack up and go back to London tomorrow, I think. There's nothing to stay for."

"Do you mean that?" I asked incredulously, and went over to the dressing table and brushed my hair furiously.

"Why not?" he murmured peacefully.

"Well, just because once Jan is safely out of the house you might have a chance to find out who really did it," I told him.

"There's an idea!" he said.

"It *is* an idea. *Quite* an idea," I agreed firmly.

"You're sure?" he asked quizzically.

"I'm sure," I informed him bitterly. "I may be an awful idiot and all that, but I'm certain she didn't do it. She—she hasn't got the right kind of face."

"Well now," said Ambrose quite seriously. "Do you know something, Moppet? There's a man in London who might agree with you about that. Sir David Partick, one of our most eminent judges. He once summed up entirely against the weight of the evidence and the man was acquitted. I'm told that afterwards he explained to the Prosecuting Counsel, who was more than a little annoyed, that a man with a face like that of the accused could never have committed murder in any circumstances. He believed it too. And I think he was right. There's a great deal to be learnt from a study of physiognomy."

"Then you might try and do something," I insisted. "Because perhaps Sir David Partick won't be her judge."

"Who do you think looks like a murderer here?" asked Ambrose, as I began to do my face.

I felt rather solemn and queer inside.

"The worst of it is," I said slowly, "that anyone of the others might. I mean, in some circumstances. Even Edward Collingwood."

He laughed suddenly and put an arm round my shoulders.

"You haven't fallen for the lanky Edward, have you?" he asked.

I hadn't; but I liked him a lot. The kind of deep liking you have for nice plain men who, you feel, are essentially nice and rather dull. He was in love with Jan, besides. And I had a kind of idea, very vague and groundless, that he'd

been somehow bamboozled and manœuvred and kicked around between them all, between Jan and Henry Grogan and Lila.

"No," I answered briefly. "I haven't."

"Well, don't," said Ambrose ambiguously.

And as now I was ready, we went downstairs, and off to the bar. It occurred to me as we did so that the bar was the only place in the whole house where one could relax.

The thunder seemed to have gone away, but it was still raining hard, and a funny thought came to me that if Dumont was lurking about outside, he would get very wet. The idea that he meant to come back for something stuck in my mind.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

IN THE HALL, just coming out of the Inquisition Chamber, was Hollow. He looked at us both with melancholy amiability and Ambrose said, "Hullo, what are you still hanging about for? Now that the shouting and tumult has died?"

"One or two things to tidy up," said Hollow glumly. "Mr Grogan has the Chief Constable in there with him and may be some time."

"Where's Cobden?" asked Ambrose abruptly.

"He's driving Mr Collingwood to the station," said Hollow. "To meet Mr Dale, I gather. Mr Dale is Miss Faversham's solicitor."

"Oh," said Ambrose. "And is Carstairs loose, or have you manacled him and led him off to the dungeons?"

Hollow regarded him with gentle solemnity.

"I am not aware that we have any charge against Mr Carstairs," he remarked politely.

"You never know with chaps like that," said Ambrose. "At any moment they are apt to go off like a bomb and even hit policemen."

"He hasn't hit anyone," said Hollow impassively. "He's gone off to his cottage to collect a sketch book."

"It seems a wet night to go off to collect a sketch book," said Ambrose.

"Yes, it is wet," said Hollow.

The immense hall was quiet and full of shadows. Only the big chandelier in the centre corruscated and made a

pool of light in the centre, and at the foot of the stairs the original plug-ugly and the new one stood like the Frog Footmen, absolutely motionless, fantastic and theatrical figures in their gaudy uniforms.

"And now what are you doing?" asked Ambrose lazily. "Just waiting to pick up the pieces of the Chief Constable after Grogan has finished?"

"Something like that," said Hollow helpfully.

Cave appeared in the hall, making one of his silent and dignified manifestations.

He looked with disapproval at the chandelier and switched on more lights. Then he came swimming towards us and intoned that there was no formal dinner tonight, but a cold buffet in the dining room, Mr Grogan had felt it would be better.

"I couldn't agree more," said Ambrose when Cave had swum away again. "I can imagine nothing more difficult than sitting at table with Grogan, Carstairs, Collingwood, Cobden, and Mr Dale."

He looked at Hollow. "We're going to the bar," he added.

"I may see you later," said Hollow.

He didn't really seem to be with us; more as if he was all keyed up and listening to something far away.

Ambrose nodded, took my elbow between finger and thumb, and steered me away.

As we walked along the interminable passage towards the heavy door that cut off the bar from the rest of the house, Ambrose also seemed to go far away; but he came back to remark, "Did you know Carstairs was through one of those Commando courses that the Navy went in for?"

"I didn't," I told him. "Why?"

"Oh, nothing much," said Ambrose. "It explains why a

little hard rain doesn't bother him, that's all. I shouldn't relish going across country to that cottage of his in this weather myself."

"I wonder if he started off before—before they arrested Jan," I said suddenly.

"I wonder," said Ambrose blandly.

But when we got into the bar Duncan was there, sitting on a stool and flipping over the pages of a sketching book. He looked up without smiling, but without any of the sullen anger that I would have expected if he knew about what had happened to Jan.

"Hullo," he said rather grimly. "The police need their heads seeing to."

"I imagined you might take that view," said Ambrose.

"All the same," Duncan went on, "I'd rather she was safely with them than in this house. But someone's going to be sorry he was ever born before we're through. I'm blowed if I'd have raised a finger to help catch whoever removed Lila Orvini from this world if whoever it is hadn't tried to shove it onto Jan, because that's what he's done."

He sounded eminently reasonable and about ninety times more dangerous than he ever had when he was in his suppressed volcano moods.

"Know who it is then?" asked Ambrose brightly.

"I have an idea or two," said Duncan, "but I'm keeping them to myself. I intend to have a short session with him before the police take him off in their gentlemanly way."

"I don't blame you," said Ambrose conversationally. "But if you're feeling as vindictive as all that, don't overdo it. I'm told that the interval of waiting to be hanged is very unpleasant."

"That's all right," said Duncan coldly. "I'll leave him to the hangman to finish off."

Peter unobtrusively put two White Ladies on the bar.

This evening the Jamaican seemed more shadowy than ever. There was a kind of fatigue about him, as if he was tired to his bones, and also a kind of sorrow, as if he knew much more than any of us and hated knowing it.

Duncan switched from the beastly topic of the hangman and said directly to me, "I was right. Dumont's bolted. He's not in the cottage and he's taken his cash. He had a lot of cash hidden in his room."

"I wonder how he managed to do that," said Ambrose innocently. "I know the police were keeping an eye on that place of yours."

Duncan grinned whitely.

"Oh, Dumont was quite a lad for moving silently and efficiently," he said. "He had a lot of experience. It's a matter of training, you know. They didn't see me for that matter."

"But Hollow knew you were going to the cottage," said Ambrose.

"I know! But I didn't want to be seen arriving, and I wasn't. I wanted to make sure of one or two things while I was there without having any interested spectators," Duncan said flatly.

"You're dead certain Jan didn't do it?" asked Ambrose mildly.

I expected some kind of anger from Duncan in reply to that, but it didn't come. He merely looked very steadily at Ambrose and answered, "Dead certain. I know Jan, poor sweet fool. She couldn't. And she didn't."

Ambrose was about to say something when the door opened and Hollow came in.

"Hullo, Mr Carstairs," he said gently. "Have you been back long?"

"About half an hour," said Duncan.

He looked at Peter. "How long have I been back?" he asked.

"Thirty-five minutes exactly, Sir," said Peter.

"Did you go to your cottage?" asked Hollow.

"I did," said Duncan, and gave the glimmer of a grin.

"Your minions didn't spot me, incidentally. Here's what you wanted."

He tossed the sketchbook over to Hollow, who caught it neatly.

"Thank you," said Hollow. "I'd be obliged if you'd come along and point out to me the drawings that you mentioned."

"I'll show you here," said Duncan indifferently. "We're all interested, don't you think? And Merriman probably knows more about it than either of us."

"I'd prefer to see them in private," said Hollow imperturbably.

There was something in the little man's voice that jagged at the nerves, a compelling authority that was nevertheless too quiet and gentle to be comfortable.

Duncan gave a sharp laugh and slipped off the stool.

"Just as you like," he said.

He walked out of the place ahead of Hollow, and Ambrose watched him warily.

"Interesting the way he's snapped out of that neurotic strain now that he's gone into action," he observed. "I told you he'd had Commando training."

Peter looked at me apologetically.

"Mr Merriman," he said. "Forgive me saying it in front of Miss Brown. I do not wish to shock her. But Pierre Dumont was hiding in the Folly on the rise, but he is dead now."

"Do the police know?" said Ambrose sharply.

"I think they have just found him, Sir," said Peter. "The officer patrolling would reach there about twenty minutes ago. They work to a routine."

"How do you know about him being dead?" Ambrose said heavily.

"I went up there, Mr Merriman, when I got your message from the maid. I was able to go because I knew that Mr Grogan was with the Chief Constable and Mr Cobden and Mr Collingwood gone into the town. I knew no one would require anything for fifteen minutes, and it does not take long to get there and back."

"Did you tell the police?" said Ambrose slowly.

Peter shook his head.

"No," he said simply. "I said nothing. It is no concern of mine. He was a bad man and I knew they would find him."

"Could Mr Carstairs have done it?" asked Ambrose flatly.

Peter shook his head. "Mr Carstairs had only left the house one minute before I went up to the Folly. I saw him running in the opposite direction as I started off myself. It was raining, but light enough to see, and I have good eyes."

"Hell," said Ambrose gloomily. "That's torn it. You'll have to tell Hollow, I'm afraid. Otherwise he'll probably concentrate on Mr Carstairs as being the guilty one, and there'll be the devil to pay all round. There will be in any case. Hollow will want my scalp for not telling him that Dumont was in the Folly."

Peter said nothing, but that effect of sorrow deepened, and the look of fatigue.

"Give me a large Scotch," said Ambrose abruptly. "I've got to think."

"Did you know Pierre Dumont was hiding in the Folly?" I asked.

"I knew he'd go there," said Ambrose. "That cash that Duncan mentioned! Dumont took it from the cottage the day before yesterday. He did it quite openly. There was no police embargo on either Carstairs or Dumont coming and going from the cottage and Dumont strolled up there in the later afternoon, put the cash in a large brief case and strolled back here with it. Hollow's men reported the visit and the brief case. I was rather interested and kept an eye open. Dumont went out for a stroll after dinner that night in the dusk, without a brief case, but with a fishing rod and a creel. There are trout in the small stream beyond the rise. I sat very patiently with a pair of binoculars trained on the rise, and saw him come back, slip into the Folly and after a few minutes saunter back here. I took the trouble a little later in the night to have a look in the Folly myself. He'd hidden the money, done up in a brown paper parcel, beneath the floor. I meant to give Hollow the tip when we came back this afternoon. . . ."

"But why . . ." I began.

"Because, my dear young idiot," said Ambrose irritably, "Dumont knew more than was good for him; and what's more, though this is a guess, probably tried to take a leaf out of Lila's book and blackmail someone. It was infernally stupid of him, and he wasn't stupid. But he was greedy."

Peter said in a lamentable, sing-song voice, "And now nobody knows what he knew."

Ambrose, who had been sitting with one hand over his eyes, a trick of his when concentrating, suddenly looked up across at Peter.

"Except you," he said quite casually. "Better watch out, Peter. This chap means business."

Peter said nothing. He turned away and took up his interminable polishing of already gleaming glasses.

"I am safe," he said at last. "And if I am not, what is there to do about it? I do not make so much of death as the white people."

"Maybe not," said Ambrose harshly. "It may be comparatively easy for you to risk death for the sake of some complicated loyalty, but have you thought of Miss Faverham?"

"I doan unnerstand, Sah," said Peter, putting on his Deep South façade.

"Think it over," said Ambrose unpleasantly. "Come on, Delia, we'll go and explore that cold buffet."

In the solitude of the passage, which was safe from eavesdroppers, he began to swear under his breath in some language that might have been Greek for all I knew. I knew he was swearing though.

He had stopped dead to do it and he had his hands shoved down into his jacket pockets, pulling his jacket out of shape, and his face was quite different, very white and set, very angry and yet distressed.

"Confounded Jamaican," he said under his breath. "Infernal metaphysical differences. Blood brotherhoods and incomprehensible ethics . . . I didn't want him in this fix. It's the very devil of a fix. Look, Moppet, go back into the bar and stay there with him, will you? I must see Hollow. Stick in there till I come and fetch you. And keep him in there with you. He probably won't be easy. I mean, he won't talk, he'll be . . . Oh, the devil. I wonder what particular kind of curse he thinks he'll bring down on himself if he breaks his bond?"

It's odd, but I felt all turned inside out with pity myself. I know just how it was. And I felt awful. But there was

Jan Faversham to be considered. Ambrose must think everything pretty grim to ask me to do a thing like this, and it really didn't occur to me to hesitate.

"All right," I said, and my voice felt peculiar, as if it was sticking in my throat. "But don't be too long."

"I won't, Moppet," he said grimly. "Not a moment longer than I can help. I'm sorry to put it on you. . . ."

"I can see you have to," I told him quickly.

He nodded.

"And—listen—don't try and pretend anything. Don't pretend there's nothing up. You wouldn't deceive him."

"I won't," I said.

It took quite a lot to go back into that bar with its white leather and lights, its flaring modernity where Peter was so incongruously caught up between some ancient, dark superstition and the simple, clear-cut ethics of English codes and law.

He was standing in precisely the same place and attitude as when Ambrose and I had left him. The deadly fatigue had carved lines round his lips and eyes. He looked older and his eyes had sunk into his head. He paid no attention at all to me, and strangely enough I felt none of the embarrassment I had expected. Instead I had the most peculiar sense that I was protecting him in some way, and at the same time protecting Jan Faversham. But it was in a way that I can't explain. It wasn't the sort of thing you could give reasons for—like 'So long as I was there, he couldn't try and commit suicide'. Because I knew perfectly well the moment I got into the bar that I couldn't have stopped him doing anything by protesting or reasoning. I can't explain it. The only way I can describe it was that I felt that my presence kept something else at bay. I wasn't frightened, either. I was on his side and inwardly I was convinced that

Ambrose would find some way of releasing Peter from his conflict and saving him or something.

I just climbed up onto a bar stool in the most mundane way imaginable and waited.

I don't know what I expected to happen in the end. I suppose I thought that Ambrose would come back and tell Peter that everything was solved or something. But all that really happened was terribly matter-of-fact and depressing.

Detective Sergeant Fletcher appeared with another plain clothes man, both of them very calm and firm and polite, and told Peter that they must request him to go with them to the police station to help them in their investigations into the death of Pierre Dumont, as they understood he had found the body and had not immediately reported it.

Peter came out of the dark trance in which he had been all the time I had been waiting there. He stared at them and his face twitched, and then without warning he crumpled at the knees and collapsed.

They picked him up and he seemed to come to slightly, though his head lolled and he looked a dirty, yellowish-grey colour. But they held him between them and he walked jerkily, as if his joints were held together with string, like a doll's. They made encouraging noises to him, friendly noises, and it was all quite horrible.

"Mr Merriman will be along in a minute, Miss Brown," said Fletcher.

But that galvanised me into life again. I wasn't staying alone in that place with all those huge windows, with the rain streaming down them, and perhaps someone outside in the darkness watching me being left alone.

"I'll come with you to the hall," I said hurriedly.

"Well, perhaps that would be best," said Fletcher.

I followed them along the passage feeling utterly miser-

able. Ambrose hadn't been able to do anything, and now they would start questioning Peter and going on and on. And of course it had to be, because somehow or other we had to help Jan. I couldn't see who Peter could be protecting except Henry Grogan, and yet I couldn't for the life of me see how Henry Grogan could have got up to the Folly and killed Dumont. It just wasn't possible.

In the hall Ambrose was just taking leave of a tall, grizzled man who wore enormous tweeds, and Hollow was standing by looking sad and respectful. Fletcher and the other man took Peter with them towards the door and the others stood back and let them pass.

Then the grizzled man shook hands with Ambrose and went out, escorted tenderly by Hollow, and Ambrose came towards me.

"Bad, was it?" he asked anxiously.

"Pretty bad," I said.

"We've done the best we could," said Ambrose. "Now come and have something to eat. You need it. So do I."

"Where's Henry Grogan?" I asked.

Ambrose grinned faintly.

"He's sulking in his tent," he observed. "He's failed to hector the Chief Constable into tearing up all the laws and regulations in England and he's a very angry—and between you and me—a very frightened man."

"Why is he frightened?" I asked wearily. "Did he poison Lila?"

"I don't think so," said Ambrose seriously. "But the crust is beginning to crack, and a lot of things that Henry Grogan would prefer to be kept from the world are poking out their sinister little heads."

He steered me into the big dining room where, as Cave had said, there was a cold buffet. It was disgustingly

ostentatious. The kind of thing you see in films showing luxurious parties. Enough food for twenty people; cold ducks and cold chickens, and a whole salmon, and heaven knew what else. It was like a party or a wedding reception. . . .

"You can't be sick here, Moppet," said Ambrose hastily. "Hollow's joining us in a minute."

The big dining table had not been set. It stood, a pool of glimmering walnut with a huge bowl of lilies like a snow island in the centre. But two small round tables had been set and chairs placed at them in front of the fireplace. One of those electric imitation log fires had been put in the big grate and the light turned on inside it to give a spurious air of cheerful flame.

Evidently we were expected to wait on ourselves, and Ambrose went up to the buffet and began to put things onto plates. I stood looking at the shimmering lilies and then saw with a shock that someone had stood a bottle of gin next to them. Gin and Lilies. Lila and Gin and Lilies! It must have been done on purpose. It couldn't have been carelessness or chance. Not in Henry Grogan's house.

"Ambrose," I called. "Ambrose. Come and look."

"Duck or chicken?" he asked in an absorbed voice.

"Oh, never mind that," I exclaimed. "Come and look at this."

He came and stood by my side, and I saw one eyebrow slide up to his hairline.

"Well, well, well," he said, and whistled softly. "Now I wonder! . . . Hollow will be interested in this. Does it, I wonder, express a hope that the murderer will be caught or a requiem to our hopes?"

"Jan has been arrested," I reminded him.

He nodded.

"Of course, there is that," he conceded. "In which case it would be an expression of triumph. In singularly bad taste, I may say."

I thought that was an understatement. It was a beastly gesture. There was something malignant and toad-like about it. Something not quite sane. I began to shiver and couldn't stop till Ambrose caught me by the shoulders and shook me.

"Pack it up, Moppet," he said sharply. "It's nothing. Probably a spiteful effort of one of the servants."

"I d-d-don't think so," I said.

"Well, I do," he insisted. "Nothing more."

My teeth ceased chattering and I managed to say steadily, "But why aren't there any servants about? It's not natural in this house!"

"No idea," said Ambrose curtly. "The plug uglies and Cave are about. Perhaps Grogan gave instructions—thinking we should all like to be private. Your guess is as good as mine. Oh—hullo, Hollow, I'm glad to see you, there's something rather sickening here. Take a look!"

Hollow came up and stared thoughtfully at the table, then he shrugged slightly.

"Macabre," he remarked simply. "Someone didn't like Countess Orvini and I should imagine they also didn't like Miss Faversham. I wonder if they've left any prints!"

That very sensible and practical reaction removed the ghastly feeling of nervous shock, and I gave a stupid giggle.

"Bless you, Hollow, for those few common-sense words," said Ambrose.

Hollow paid no attention. He pulled out a large clean handkerchief, picked up the gin bottle with it and carried it lovingly towards the door.

"Luckily the fingerprint chap is here," he remarked.

"I'll be right back. Don't let anyone dust the lilies or the table while I'm gone."

"I begin to develop a deep affection for Hollow," said Ambrose. "Now perhaps we can eat."

He managed to collect food this time, and brought two plates over to one of the round tables. He went back and collected a bottle of wine from the buffet, opened it with a massive corkscrew and sauntered over again.

"Moppet," he said. "There's someone round who is being too clever by half. These elaborations are very interesting. Ah, here comes Hollow back again. What in the name of heaven does he think he's doing now?"

Hollow, with an air of calm efficiency, unfolded a gigantic dust sheet and, with the aid of a stolid constable, draped it over the big table, covering up the bowl of lilies which made a small hump that looked rather sinister. He said something to the constable, who nodded briskly and departed, while Hollow, with a self-satisfied expression, came and sat down at the table.

"I've put that fellow on to keep an eye on the room when it's empty," he said. "Just in case anyone took it into their heads to come in and polish that table. I'll have it done for prints later."

"You have some good ideas sometimes," said Ambrose kindly. "And if you look in the centre of that funeral urn on the table, you might find something that might interest you."

He put an enormous forkful of cold duck and potato salad into his mouth and began to munch contentedly.

"Why couldn't you have said so before I covered it up?" demanded Hollow reproachfully.

"It only just occurred to me," said Ambrose, speaking with his mouth full. "An inspiration, as it were."

"We'll look now," said Hollow. "I'll get that constable in again."

He stood up and went over to the door.

Ambrose with a resigned expression stood up himself.

"Such impetuosity," he sighed. "It could have waited till we had eaten."

Hollow and the constable lifted the dust sheet carefully and the constable, who was a tall man with long arms, leaned forward without brushing against the table and lifted the big urn-like bowl and brought it over to our table.

Hollow delicately probed among the scented flowers, made an exclamation under his breath and brought out a big pill box that had been wired to one of the lilies.

"I'll be—bothered," he said softly, and began to untwist the wire.

There was a label on the box, and written in ornate but small script, the words, "Not to be taken. Only one was needed."

Ambrose fished in his pocket and produced a large clean handkerchief of his own and proffered it to Hollow, who took it without a word and very tenderly wrapped the pill box in it.

"Take that out to Taylor for the necessary action," he told the constable and as the man marched away, sat down heavily at the table.

"I don't like the kind of mind that goes in for humour of this kind," he remarked.

"Not nice," said Ambrose primly. "I wonder who gave instructions that the dining room was to be unattended once the buffet was set out?"

"We'll discover that," said Hollow.

"Cobden and Collingwood back yet?" asked Ambrose.

"Not yet. They may have gone to the Station. The solicitor might want to see Miss Faversham straight away," suggested Hollow.

Ambrose scowled.

"I had the idea that Grogan had insisted that he saw Dale first," he said slowly. "Something the Chief Constable said. He said that Grogan had spoken very peremptorily to Collingwood about it, and that it was a little odd that a man of Collingwood's standing put up with it. Still, perhaps Collingwood decided to ignore the command."

"Command?" asked Hollow dubiously.

"I gathered it was a command," said Ambrose. "So did the Chief Constable. He didn't like it much. I suppose Collingwood and Dale between them could deal with any objections from Cobden. By the way, have you any idea what time this room was finished?"

"About five o'clock," said Hollow.

"Do you think we might ask Cave a few questions?" Ambrose asked.

"I'll send for him," said Hollow.

"It's all right," Ambrose informed him. "Moppet, there's a bell in the wall there. Make a long arm and ring it, will you?"

He poured out three glasses of Burgundy. Hollow made a movement of dissent, but Ambrose took no notice.

"Good for you," he remarked.

Cave swam into the room from a service room behind the long table and advanced smoothly, but without enthusiasm.

"Your witness," said Hollow to Ambrose under his breath. "This is unofficial."

"Cave," said Ambrose pleasantly. "Who chose this very depressing floral decoration for the big table?"

Cave gazed at the lilies with sincere astonishment, and then at the big table which was glimmering dimly. They hadn't put the dust sheet back.

"I've no idea, Sir," said Cave. "It was an arrangement of white and red roses I put there."

"Someone disapproved of your choice," said Ambrose. "Any idea who it could be?"

"None of the staff, Sir," said Cave stiffly. "I'm sure of that. They wouldn't think of such a thing. Besides, Sir, Mr Grogan gave strict instructions that no lilies were to be brought into the house again . . . after the unhappy death, Sir. The Countess liked lilies, Sir. But not Mr Grogan."

"I see," said Ambrose. "By the way, Cave, not that we mind, but is there any particular reason why we have this splendid isolation? No service?"

Cave looked distressed.

"Well, Sir," he said. "Mr Grogan's orders. No reason was given me. Mr Cobden instructed me to that effect."

"So no one has been in the room since five o'clock?" pursued Ambrose.

"No one, Sir. The orders were quite explicit. No one to enter the dining room except Mr Grogan or his guests, Sir."

"Thanks," said Ambrose. "That's all, Cave."

"Thank you, Sir," said Cave.

I caught a flickering insolence in his manner and Hollow must have caught it also, because he said suddenly in a hard, official tone:

"By the way, my constable will be in here while the room is unoccupied. Understand? And no one is to touch the big table."

Cave looked palely unpleasant.

"I hardly think Mr Grogan would wish that," he said.

"Whether Mr Grogan wishes it or not," said Hollow,

"the constable will be here. You seem to forget that there has been another murder of one of Mr Grogan's guests and the police are in charge here."

Cave said nothing, and swam away again, but not quite so smoothly as usual.

"He'll go straight to Grogan," said Ambrose with satisfaction. "Then we may get some fireworks."

"He's refused to see anyone since the Chief Constable left," said Hollow dubiously. "I haven't had a chance to tell him that we took the Jamaican down to the Station."

"How long can you hold him there?" asked Ambrose anxiously.

"Until tomorrow," said Hollow.

I interrupted then.

"Will they keep on interrogating him all that time? I—I hate thinking of that."

"They won't interrogate him at all," said Ambrose. "Will they, Hollow?"

"No. Don't you get worried," said Hollow. "They'll just keep him there out of harm's way. Mr Merriman's idea."

"You see, Moppet," explained Ambrose. "It happens that someone else besides Peter knows what Dumont knew, and that person has no inhibitions about telling."

"Duncan?" I asked quickly.

Ambrose nodded.

"Then where is he?" I said. "Have you got him in safe keeping, too?"

Hollow shook his head. "Not Mr Carstairs," he informed me. "We didn't want to do that. Besides, Mr Carstairs is fully aware of the risks and he's fully capable of looking after himself. He'll turn up when the right moment comes."

"I think I might be told what's really happening," I said. "It's a bit nerve-wracking this way."

"Well, it's like this," Hollow began and then stopped as the dining room door opened and Edward Collingwood appeared.

Ambrose gave a little sigh, but I couldn't be sure whether it was relief or exasperation. For me it was utterly exasperating, because now I should have to sit through a lot more talk, and still not know what it all meant.

Edward, however, marched up to us aggressively.

"I gather I have you to thank, Merriman," he said in a bitter, cold voice, "for handing Jan over to the police."

"I suppose you might be fairly correct in saying so," said Ambrose, almost smugly. "But really Jan herself was chiefly responsible. She had done the most astonishing things."

"Don't try and hedge," said Edward harshly. "It was a damnable piece of treachery. She thought you were her friend."

"Have you seen her?" asked Ambrose.

"Just for a few minutes," he answered. "She actually still believes in you."

"I'm glad of that," said Ambrose quietly.

"Oh, my God," said Edward, and slumped into a chair and buried his face in his hands. "It was a damnable piece of work. Damnable."

"You're wrong, Mr Collingwood," said Hollow shortly. "Is Mr Cobden about, do you know?"

"The little swine's in his room attending to a black eye," said Edward with sour satisfaction. "He had the impertinence to try and kidnap us and drive us back here instead of to the Police Station."

Hollow made a choking noise and stood up hurriedly.

"I want to see him," he explained. "I'll see you later, Merriman."

"Where's Dale?" Ambrose asked Edward.

"Seeing Grogan," said Collingwood. "It may take him some time. He has quite a lot to say to him, on my behalf as well as Jan's."

"Good," said Ambrose pleasantly. "I'm glad you've decided to face up to it at last. Now we can talk."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I SAID afterwards to Ambrose that it really did seem rather foolish of Edward to allow himself to be bullied and hectorred by Henry Grogan, just because Grogan knew about Jan and Dumont. After all, nothing very much would have happened to her even if it had come out that she'd committed bigamy. She had genuinely thought that Dumont or Berulfsen was dead. But Ambrose said Edward was the sort of man who was very particular about reputations and believed in shielding woman whatever happened. And it appeared that he had known for a long time about the bigamy, even while he was married to her. And Jan was terrified about it too, and he was all for protecting her. Besides, Ambrose told me privately then, Edward had been almost blackmailed into giving Grogan confidential information about government things, like what was going to happen in the Budget, that kind of business; and, of course, that had given Grogan an even stronger handle. But, that evening in the dining room, all that was said in front of Hollow was about the bigamy, and it appeared that Hollow knew that already.

To get back to the moment when Edward was in the dining room, the first thing was that he didn't know about Dumont, and when he heard he stared quite incredulously at us all and then said, "Thank heavens for that!"

Hollow looked rather shocked and Ambrose murmured pensively, "Not the most tactful or discreet response, my good Collingwood."

"Nonsense," said Collingwood almost cheerfully. "I didn't kill him and I'm not going to pretend that it's anything but a good thing he's departed from this world. How was he killed, by the way?"

It struck me then that until now it simply hadn't occurred to me to wonder how Dumont had been killed, it hadn't seemed important at all. The truth was that secretly I must have felt just the same as Edward did . . . just purely relieved to think that anyone so horrible had gone for good. But I saw then that it was important, of course.

"Stabbed," said Hollow laconically.

"With an ordinary kitchen knife," said Ambrose helpfully. "Very neat. Could have been abstracted from the kitchen at almost any time without anyone knowing. I gather the kitchen is over-equipped with sharp knives. In fact, our murderer is very neat altogether. Uses things that practically every other person in the house could have got hold of without any difficulty at all."

"Well, there's one thing," said Edward with supreme satisfaction. "No one can try and shove this onto Jan, and as presumably Dumont was killed because he was a danger to whoever murdered Lila, it lets Jan out altogether."

Hollow said nothing to that, nor did Ambrose. Edward looked at them and frowned slightly.

"What time was he killed?" he asked abruptly.

"We can't say yet," said Hollow. "Approximately between four and four-thirty, I think."

"Where?" asked Edward.

"In the Folly," said Ambrose. "He had a great parcel of money stowed away there. The motive might be robbery, of course."

"Who'd want his filthy money?" asked Edward contemptuously.

I really did think he was being a bit naïve and school-boyish. I mean to say, there are an awful lot of people about today who want money, it's become far more important than it used to be.

"I might; Delia might . . . Hollow might—even you might," said Ambrose placidly. "Almost anyone might, except Grogan, and presumably he doesn't want money, whatever else he may be missing in life."

"He wanted Jan," said Edward sombrely. "That's what he wanted."

I stared at him. After all, it was a very queer way of showing affection to try and have your beloved railroaded into a mental home.

"He wanted her always," Edward went on.

It seemed as if once having started to talk candidly he couldn't stop.

"When she married me instead, he was bitterly hurt and angry. He pretended he wasn't, but he never forgave her really. Oddly enough, he forgave me. It was Jan he had it in for. . . . He used to make her come here for visits. He knew about Dumont, you see, and used that as a weapon. He used to make her meet Lila Orvini and that was an insult. . . . He was a little crazy on the subject. . . ."

"Do you think he thought Jan had really murdered Lila?" asked Ambrose suddenly.

"I think so," said Edward unhappily. "He never actually said so to me, but I think he believed that she had been driven to it . . . and that it was his fault. I think he was playing for her to be found insane. . . . She's so unbalanced in a way that it might have been easy to push her over the edge. I think he wanted to save her in the end, you know."

Ambrose gave a little grunt.

"I suppose that might explain it," he said dubiously.

"Well, what else?" demanded Edward belligerently.

Ambrose shrugged and said nothing, and, just as the ensuing silence was getting thick, the door opened and a policeman came in and asked if Hollow could come to the telephone.

"And what's he hanging round here for?" asked Edward suspiciously. "I thought the Yard had taken over."

"The Yard," said Ambrose, "took over, but having made an arrest they have taken themselves away again."

"You don't mean to tell me," said Edward grimly, "that they really believe Jan did it?"

"They don't arrest people without good grounds," said Ambrose flatly. "Be your age, Collingwood."

"I can't believe it," said Edward. "It's pure nonsense."

But he didn't sound really sure, and his nice plain face was strained and white, and his shoulders sort of slumped.

"But Dumont," he added after a moment. "That disposes of it, doesn't it?"

"We don't yet know the motive for Dumont," said Ambrose patiently. "It could be the money."

Hollow put his head round the door.

"Can I have a word with you?" he said to Ambrose.

"Certainly," said Ambrose with a hideous brightness.

Left alone with Edward I simply didn't know what to say. He looked so wretched and I guessed that he was still in love with Jan, in spite of divorces and bigamies and everything. And I knew quite well that what people did didn't make you fall out of love with them. You still loved them, even if they were absolutely impossible.

"Why don't you have something to eat?" I asked, after an interval during which he just sat and drummed with his fingers on the table.

He came out of his miserable trance, half smiled at me

and said he didn't think he wanted to eat, but he'd get himself a drink. He went over to the buffet and poured out a stiff whisky, and that made me remember Peter, and think of the bar. Somehow it gave me a very peculiar feeling to think of the bar being quite empty and without Peter there strumming on that guitar of his. It really did give me the oddest feeling, rather uncanny.

I hadn't time to think about it long, because the door was flung open and Mark Cobden marched in. He had a black eye just as Edward had said, and he looked defiant and very glittering about the eyes.

"Well now," he said loudly and looked at the big table. "Lilies! I guess that's a very happy thought of Cave's. Kind of touching."

He paid no attention at all to Edward, who stalked back from the buffet and sat down again.

"It wasn't Cave's thought," I said without thinking. "It was someone else's."

"Was it really?" said Mark, and laughed loudly. "Someone paying tribute to poor Lila. Imagine such a thing!"

He went over to the buffet and poured out a simply enormous whisky, squirted a thimbleful of soda into it and then gulped it down.

"Have you heard about Dumont?" he asked Edward aggressively. "While we were having our pleasant trip, someone bumped him off in the Folly."

"It might have been before we started," said Edward coldly.

"Gee! You don't say!" said Mark. "Then I suppose the police will start all over again asking us a lot of polite questions?"

Edward said nothing and I couldn't think of anything, so I pretended to be lighting a cigarette.

"Dumont taken for a ride," Mark said, and gave a horrid little giggle. "Well, they can't blame Jan for that, can they?"

"Be quiet," said Edward in a dangerous voice.

"Oh sure, sure," said Mark, and giggled again.

A door behind me opened and Grogan appeared with a short, stout man, whose round face was both shrewd and innocent. He had short grey hair that curled up into two little horns above his temples and a buttoned-up mouth.

"Hullo, Edward," said Henry Grogan. "I've brought Dale in to have something to eat. We've discussed everything very fully, and settled on the best policy."

He came up to the small table as he spoke, and I saw that he was just the same as when I had first seen him, cool and dynamic and very confident. He smiled down at me.

"Well," he remarked, "you look tired. By the way, this is Mr Dale. Poor Jan's lawyer. Dale, this is Miss Brown."

"How d'you do?" said Dale pleasantly.

He smiled at me as if we were meeting at a tea party, and as if nothing horrible was hanging over everyone.

"There's only one policy," said Edward, "and that is to get Jan out of this."

"We'll do that, don't worry," said Dale.

"Mark," said Grogan curtly, "get Mr Dale a drink and see what he would like to eat."

"Thank you," said Dale. "A little cold chicken, please."

"Merriman will be here in a minute," said Grogan smoothly, "and we will have a conference. There are a number of things to be discussed."

A muscle twitched in his cheek and his eyes were the coldest blue I had ever seen, and yet quite suddenly I was dreadfully sorry for him. I didn't know why. It seemed the most absurd thing in the world to be sorry for Henry

Grogan, like being sorry for a machine, but all the same I was. In spite of all I'd heard and the way he'd treated Jan Faversham and Edward.

"Yes—a conference," said Mr Dale briskly. "All of us get together and talk the whole thing over. We may pick up some clue that the police have missed. It's quite possible. People keep things back from the police. Very foolishly. Things that don't seem important, but frequently are. Let me see, we have everyone here who was present at the poker game, haven't we? Excepting, of course, Miss Faversham and—er—Dumont."

"And Carstairs," said Mark. "Carstairs is quite an important member of the committee, I reckon."

"He'll be here," said Grogan. "Don't worry."

Mark sauntered over with a plate of cold chicken and salad and put it down in front of Mr Dale. He looked very young and very tired, but in some unpleasant way, secretly pleased about something.

I wished Ambrose would hurry up and return. Without him I felt lost and rather scared. Everything seemed to be boiling up and Mark did look so horribly pleased, as if he knew something that amused him, but wouldn't amuse anyone else. I got the idea that he knew something about Duncan and meant to throw it into the middle of us like a bombshell.

The big room was heavy with disquietude and expectancy and Henry Grogan was so quiet, so dangerously quiet and watchful. But when Ambrose did arrive, Duncan was with him, and I got the impression that only the fact that Ambrose had put some kind of strong pressure on him prevented him from going berserk. He looked again like a lowering, goaded young bull.

"So here we all are," said Ambrose. "By the way,

Grogan, were the lilies your idea? There was a gin bottle as well, but Hollow found it so unsuitable that he took it away."

"Don't be a fool," said Grogan. "We'll find out about the lilies—among other things."

"Shall we sit down?" suggested Ambrose. "This may be quite a long conference."

"Come and sit down," said Grogan curtly to Mark, who had gone back to the buffet, poured out another stiff drink, and was now leaning up against it with his hands in his pockets.

He sauntered over and sat down next to me. I wished he hadn't, but there was nothing I could do about it. Somehow he gave me the jitters, he was so full of malicious and secret knowledge, as if he was waiting for something beastly to happen to someone.

"If you don't mind," said Ambrose to Grogan, "I'd like to ask a few questions. There are one or two points that are interesting."

"Go ahead," said Grogan, in that curt, strained voice.

"Did you mark the notes with which you paid for the Tintoretto?" asked Ambrose casually.

Grogan gave a tight smile.

"I did," he said.

"That's interesting," said Ambrose blandly. "Because they've been found."

"What do you mean?" said Grogan sharply.

"Two thirds of the purchase price was paid by Countess Orvini into her bank," said Ambrose slowly. "You paid Dumont, I think, the morning I came down."

"That's so," said Grogan.

"The money was paid into Countess Orvini's banking account by a registered parcel that arrived the morning

after her death. The police had already seen the manager and the parcel of notes was held."

"I had already been informed by Jan that Lila was involved in that swindle," said Grogan in an expressionless voice.

"It was obvious, don't you think," said Ambrose, "that she also was the instigator of the whole thing and the only other person who profited was Dumont, who got the smaller share."

"Infernally obvious," said Grogan wearily. "Why harp on it?"

"Well," drawled Mark, "it sure does look as if someone grudged her that share, doesn't it?"

"It does," said Ambrose. "By the way, Hollow has just told me that the maid, Rose, has recovered her memory and has made a statement. A very interesting statement."

"That girl sure must have a thick skull," said Mark.

"The kitchen maid," said Ambrose to no one in particular, "slept next to Rose. It seems that on the night that Rose was knocked on the head, this young person had, against all rules and regulations, been out of bed and keeping an assignation with one of the Frog—er—one of the footmen. On her way back from this she saw someone come hurriedly out of Rose's room and scurry away. Being an improper young person she thought nothing of it at the moment, merely an amorous interlude on Rose's part. When she found out what had really happened she lay low and said nothing, because of her own silly little secret. However, another murder has scared her silly and she came along with Cave to Hollow and made a statement."

"Who was it?" asked Edward sharply.

"You darn little liar," said Mark shrilly. "You darn little liar. She wasn't in her room when I . . ."

He stopped dead.

"When you what, Cobden?" asked Ambrose gently.

Grogan sat so still that he looked as if he was literally carved out of stone. Still and rigid and with a dreadful tired look.

"So you're so clever . . ." said Mark shrilly. "Well, think this out. Lila was my mother. My dear mother. Does that shake you? Does it? Does a guy murder his mother?"

He jumped up suddenly, caught me by the arms and swung me in front of him, and I felt something hard and round pressed against my back.

"Does he?" shrilled Mark. "Does he? And don't any of you move till this is fixed or dear little Delia here will get a bullet right through her. Get that? Get it?"

"Has he got a gun, Delia, or is he bluffing?" asked Ambrose steadily.

"He's got a gun, Ambrose," I answered. I hope sounding very cool and calm. I felt quite sick really.

"What did you think Delia knew that made you make Rose give the footman knockout drops so that you could get at Delia?" asked Ambrose calmly, as if he was just asking questions in a normal way.

"Don't be a fool," said Mark. "Dumont's door was new to hers. I knew she hadn't a clue what it was all about. I got that from Rose. It was Dumont I was after. I just wanted to get Dumont to give me a fair share of what he got out of that picture swindle. After all, even if I wasn't in on it, they couldn't have pulled it off if I'd chosen to open my mouth. So they owed me some of it."

I could see them all staring at me. All except Duncan, who had a sketch book out and seemed to be sketching. I hoped none of them would try and jump at Mark Cobden, because if they did I simply hadn't a chance.

"In fact," Mark added in a self-pitying voice, "I was owed one hell of a lot. One hell of a lot. . . ."

"I don't see why you had to slug Rose if all you wanted to do was to rob Dumont," said Ambrose in tones of deep interest.

"Well, I didn't want her shootin' off her mouth," said Mark. "After all, I had to get her to give that darned footman the dope, didn't I? I kinder guessed it would keep her quiet long enough for everything to blow over."

"If all you wanted to do was to rob Dumont," said Ambrose, "it seems an excessive measure. She wouldn't have said anything, surely. She'd have been too scared."

Mark giggled suddenly.

"Better be safe than sorry," he said. "Listen, you're darned clever, aren't you? Darned clever? Well, listen here, I've been ready for this. Ready all the time. I've got my get-away fixed. I was off tonight, anyway. I just had to wait and get the money. Couldn't go without a money. And now I'll just have to take dear little Delia with me. That's all."

He giggled again.

"Not that I mind that," he added. "She's kinder cute."

"But you haven't got the money," said Ambrose gently.

"Sure I've got it, good and safe," said Mark. "Now just listen, folks, Delia and I are going to back out of this room quite nice and politely. Just as dignified and polite as your marvellous English policemen. And all the time I'm going to be as close to Delia as a Siamese twin, and if anyone at any time tries any funny business, dear little Delia will be wearing wings and twanging a harp."

"I think I'm going to faint," I said in a muffled voice that sounded queer even to me.

"Don't consider it for a moment, Honey," said Mark.

"If you fainted I should sure be so startled that this gun would go off."

"No, don't faint, Moppet," said Ambrose sharply.

Mark began to back towards the side door where Grogan and Dale had come into the dining room. It was just behind us, and he was gripping my arm so hard that it hurt and that gun was still poking into my back. I felt horribly sick and yet detached, as if it was happening to me in a dream.

"You can't get away with it, you know," said Ambrose conversationally.

But it wasn't any comfort to me. Ambrose was bluffing beautifully, but it wasn't going to work. Mark Cobden was clean mad. I know that. He was inhuman and didn't look at things properly any more. He was right out of reality . . .

"No, of course you can't," said Duncan suddenly. "Not without money, Cobden. And I've got your money. Look!"

Mark looked.

Duncan was holding up a paper parcel tied up with yellow tape.

"Gimme that!" Mark yelled and let go of my arm. I felt the gun move too and before I knew what was happening, Duncan seemed to lunge past me. He gave a sideway heave with his shoulder that sent me spinning across the room. I heard the gun go off with a shattering noise, everything went black, and I felt myself falling into deep, empty darkness.

When I came to again two policemen had Mark safely handcuffed and were removing him while he bawled confessions and self-pity and curses in a shrill distraught voice.

Ambrose was kneeling by my side. Henry Grogan was by my side too, standing very rigid and looking down at me with eyes that seemed to have sunk right back into his

head. When he saw that I was all right, he walked very stiffly and like an old man out of the room.

"Have some brandy, my poor little moppet," said Ambrose. "You gave me quite a turn."

"Really," I said huskily. "If anyone had a turn, it was me."

"Not at all," said Ambrose. "You're a heroine. I'm just a nervous wreck."

But he looked so unhappy and so truly affectionate that I forgave him everything. It's simply maddening the way I'm always forgiving him for things.

Duncan appeared beside him carrying a glass of brandy. He looked down at me and gave a lopsided grin.

"You're a grand girl," he said. "You should have been in the Commandos!"

"Sit up and drink your nice brandy," said Ambrose. "And then I'll tell you all about it and then we'll go home."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

JANET appeared in the dining room. It appeared that Hollow had told Cave to send her along when he went out with the two policemen and Mark. She took one look at me and said firmly, "I'd better put you to bed, my dear."

I had a bruise on my temple where I'd hit the table when Duncan sent me spinning, and my shoulder felt as if it had been kicked by a horse, but I wasn't going to be put to bed, I was going home with Ambrose. Not for anything in the world would I have spent another night in that house.

"No, Janet, I'm taking her home," said Ambrose.

"Then let her come and have something put on that bruise," Janet insisted.

I clutched Ambrose by the hand, and shook my head feebly.

"Then I'll get some arnica and aspirin," said Janet practically.

"And if you'd pack her things for her," suggested Ambrose, "we'd be most grateful."

"Aye, I'll do that," said Janet.

She hesitated and looked at Edward Collingwood.

"Will you be getting that puir lamb out of that prison now?" she demanded fiercely.

"Yes, Janet," said Edward. "Mr Dale has gone to do that. I'm going down myself in a little while." He smiled at her very pleasantly. "I think you'd better come with me, Janet. I shall take her straight back to London and she'll need someone to look after her."

"I should think so," said Janet gruffly, but she looked suddenly radiant. "I'll go and get that arnica now, and then I'll do the packing."

Duncan was standing by the buffet, looking meditative and eating a leg of chicken inelegantly, holding it in his hand and dispensing with anything so prissy as a knife and fork.

Edward Collingwood was sitting by the small table looking tired, almost exhausted, but very much at peace.

Ambrose helped me to my feet and led me tenderly over to the table by Edward.

"That was a brain wave of yours about the money," said Ambrose to Duncan.

Duncan grinned rather grimly.

"That's the way my brain works," he said. "I got a lot of practice during the war. I'm not so bright in other ways unfortunately. . . . I got quite good at guessing how chaps would react to shock and surprise."

"What was in that parcel?" asked Edward.

"Sketch books," said Duncan and grinned again. "I'd brought them down for Hollow. I'd a lot of sketches of Dumont, from all angles. I used him as a model quite a lot and the Security people wanted to have a look at them. Just to check up on some of his activities, I gathered. Naturally enough there were no photographs of him, but I gather he'd a gift for changing his personality and had been over here in various characters. Good sketches show up a lot of detail, you know. Shape of ears, tricks of expression and all that. And it just came to me that the package looked as if it contained money, and I guessed that the one thing which would distract his attention enough to give me a chance to tackle him was the thought that I had his cash. . . ."

"Pretty sound," said Ambrose. "I could do with a drink."

Janet reappeared at that moment, followed by Cave, who looked crumpled and shaken, and who was carrying a tray with a pot of tea on it and cups and saucers.

He put it down gloomily and departed in silence.

"Nice strong cup of tea for you, my dear," said Janet. "And with plenty of sugar. Now let me look at that bruise."

Ambrose got his drink and strolled back to us.

"Well, there it is," he said thoughtfully. "There wasn't much hope of getting him over Lila. Though Duncan here knew about the relationship. Dumont knew, of course, and had told Duncan in confidence."

"That's why I never thought the little twirp had done it," said Duncan. "That's why I kept my mouth shut. But when I found that Jan had been taken off to gaol, and still more after I heard that Dumont had been done in, I decided it was time the police heard about that relationship and I told Hollow. He was a bit disbelieving, but then I told him I had some drawings of Cobden and of Dumont, and that if he looked closely at the Cobden ones, he'd see the likeness to Lila . . . and incidentally to Grogan. It's not obvious, but it's there. And I'd accentuated it in some of the drawings. . . ."

"Poor devil," said Ambrose unexpectedly.

"What's poor about him?" asked Duncan curtly.

"Would you have liked Lila for a mother?" asked Ambrose. "She persuaded Grogan he was Grogan's son, and Grogan took him on on condition the boy was never told. Her affair with Grogan had been completely casual and she went off to America soon afterwards. Mark was born out there. Lila was in some kind of leg show, and she boarded him out with foster parents and he had no idea

who his parents were. Then, when he was about seventeen, Lila turned up again, pretended to take a great fancy to him and introduced him to Grogan, who was on some business tour or other. Grogan took him on as some kind of general personal assistant and brought him back to England. He was always difficult and unbalanced and then when Lila turned up in England, having collected the title of countess on the way, she told Mark in confidence who he was and proceeded to make his life one humiliating hell. She knew he cheated at cards and other nasty little tricks he had and held them over his head. He loathed her. He loathed her more and more, but he was dead scared of her. And finally he decided to get rid of her. It was easy enough in the circumstances."

"How did you know all this?" I asked.

I was feeling better. The tea had done a lot of good and Janet had gone away to do the packing. She didn't seem interested at all now that she knew Jan was safe.

"Jan knew all about it," said Ambrose.

"*Jan?*" said Duncan and Edward simultaneously.

Ambrose nodded.

"Grogan had confided in her quite a long time ago. He had a habit of confiding in her. . . ."

"Yes," said Edward dreamily. "He used to say she had a schoolgirl code of honour and would suffer anything rather than betray a confidence. It was true, too. She never told me. . . ."

"And look what her reward was," said Duncan furiously. "Grogan was prepared to push her into a lunatic asylum so that anything she might say would be regarded as the babblings of someone insane."

Ambrose hesitated.

"I don't know," he said at length. "I think that Grogan

had a kind of obsession about Mark. A colossal guilt complex. Jan thought so. She told me all about it that morning. I bluffed it out of her really by pretending I knew. But she knew quite well what Grogan was doing and, curiously enough, even that wasn't going to shake her out of her promise. In a queer way she didn't even blame him. But she was frightened and very near breaking point. What she was really scared of was that she might go a little crazy. Her nerves were all to pieces, thanks to Lila, and she felt very near the edge. She didn't believe that Grogan would go so far as to let her be hanged, but she did believe he'd go to any lengths bar that to save Mark."

"My God!" said Edward.

"Didn't that occur to you?" said Duncan savagely.

Edward shook his head wearily.

"I was half afraid she might have done it," he said.

Ambrose shrugged slightly.

"Funny how easily people suspect their nearest and dearest," he said acidly. "However—she thought, you see, and maybe she was right, that Grogan believed that if Mark hadn't been brought up the way he was, he might not have been the mess he was, and so he'd got to be protected. It wasn't very sane, that point of view. But then I don't think Grogan is all that normal. It was then I thought that the safest place for her would be a nice, quiet police cell. . . . So I put all the evidence in front of Hollow and March and they did the rest. . . ."

"It was a filthy risk to take," said Duncan aggressively.

"Oh, I could produce an equal amount of evidence for her innocence," said Ambrose. "But if they'd once got her certified, it would have been the devil of a long job to get her uncertified. Besides, I wouldn't have put it past Cobden to have murdered her if he thought it would be any help to

him. I was quite certain by then that it was Cobden, but how the devil to prove it? He was obviously playing for Jan as the scapegoat. And the only mistake he made was not to leave things as they were. He was frightened of Rose. . . ."

"But I don't see what he had to be frightened of," I objected. "I mean, she didn't know anything about it, did she? She only knew about him persuading her to dope the cocoa. . . ."

"She knew more than that," said Ambrose. "It was Rose who put the poisoned capsules in Lila's bag."

"Oh, no," I exclaimed.

"Oh, yes," said Ambrose. "She made a full statement this evening. Hollow heard from March. That was when he said he wanted to speak to me, you remember. It's a great mistake to bash your accomplice over the head unless you make a proper job of it. Rose is distinctly vindictive."

"But Rose was very fond of Lila," I said. "She told me so, and she meant it."

"Oh, yes," said Ambrose. "But she was still more fond of Mark Cobden. Mind you, she never knew that she was putting in a deadly pill, Cobden told her that Lila was taking much too much of her favourite dope, and it would be a kindly deed to remove the capsule with the dope, and put in a couple of harmless ones. Rose agreed enthusiastically, and did the deed when she was helping Lila to dress for dinner. Fine. Cobden obviously had it all sorted out. When Rose discovers she has put a dose of poison in Lila's bag, she's going to create. Well, let her. All he has to do is to put the wind up her. If she says anything she is an accessory before and after the act. She daren't say anything, he argues, and besides that she's infatuated with him. He can manage her beautifully. But Rose has ideas that don't suit him at all. She quite genuinely believes that he's in love

with her. She jumps to the conclusion after the first shock that the mere fact that he has trusted her to such an extent means that he intends to marry her and she takes up that attitude. She is not really a very nice little girl, our Rose, in spite of her soft country maid personality. Right now he knows he's as much in her hands as she is in his. She shows every sign of doing a hell hath no fury act if he doesn't come up to scratch. She's quite prepared to be hanged with him if she can't live with him in Holy Matrimony. So she's got to be removed. But a little elaborately. Hence the complicated business of doping the footman. The man will say when he comes round that Sweet Rose gave him the drugged cocoa, but Rose is dead. She was meant to be dead, that is. And so a variety of motives can be imagined for her killing and no one will jump to the right conclusion that she was the accomplice. Because if that conclusion is come to, then a trail leads to Cobden, whose smudgy little affair with Rose is known obviously in the servants' hall. And now, after being bashed on the head, Rose is all set to have him hanged."

"Then did you have to go through all that performance of making him give himself away, and nearly getting me shot?" I said indignantly.

"Yes, did you?" asked Edward rather pompously.

Ambrose looked faintly embarrassed.

"I'm sorry about that, Moppet," he said. "But Hollow felt, and so did I, that Rose in the witness box would be a very shaky proposition. They wouldn't run her as an accessory, because there's no doubt that she acted in all innocence, and she'd be the prosecution's chief witness. But defending counsel could get busy on discrediting her, a woman scorned and all that, vindictiveness as the motive for her story. . . ."

He stopped abruptly.

"There it is," he said.

"Maybe you were right," I said magnanimously. "Anyway, I didn't get shot."

He gave me an odd little smile.

"What a nice moppet," he said.

"Oh, well," said Edward abruptly. "Thank you for what you did about Jan. I'm going along to collect her now. . . ."

"I'll come with you," said Duncan.

They looked at each other in a hostile silence for a moment and then Edward shrugged resignedly.

"Very well," he said.

"Goodbye, Delia," said Duncan and shook me by the hand ceremoniously. "I'm sorry I had to barge you like that."

"Don't think about it for another moment," I told him politely.

He looked at Ambrose.

"Thanks for looking after Jan," he said.

"Not at all," said Ambrose negligently. "I'm sure that Hollow would have done it just as well."

"Not quite," said Duncan ambiguously.

"Come along, Moppet," said Ambrose suddenly. "I'm driving you home straight away."

The storm was over and the roads were wet and shining, the colour of gun metal. A watery moon was in the sky and rags and tatters of clouds.

Ambrose drove in silence. Something seemed to be weighing heavily on his mind. I wondered whether it was anything to do with the telephone call he'd received from Hollow just before we left.

But I felt too tired to do anything about it, and kind of peaceful.

But after a while I wanted to talk.

"I told you I didn't want to go to Grogan's," I said thoughtfully.

"Yes, Moppet, you must be psychic," he agreed amiably.

"It felt peculiar going off without a word to him," I continued.

He shook his head.

"It would have been more peculiar to have seen him to say good-bye and thank him for a pleasant visit," he observed.

Well, of course I knew that, but all the same it did feel a bit awful to think of him left behind there with that dreadful knowledge about Mark . . . and nobody caring at all.

"Besides," said Ambrose, "Peter will be back there by now, and Peter's about the only person he could endure at the moment."

"Why Peter?" I said.

"He met up with Peter in some funny business in Jamaica," said Ambrose. "I gather he saved Peter's life or something, and then they went in for some heathen nonsense about blood brotherhood. Peter's a soothing character."

We drove on a few miles and then I said, "Do you think Edward and Jan will come together again now . . . or will she prefer Duncan?"

"Haven't an idea," said Ambrose cheerfully. "But Edward is a bit old for you, Moppet."

I didn't choose to pay any attention to that.

"We'll get to town in time for the grey dawn," he said. "I telephoned your fond Papa and he'll have the first-aid

box waiting for you, and hot milk and all that. He was rather scratchy with me."

Well I naturally expected he would be. No father likes to think of his daughter being nearly shot and all that.

"I'll tell him I enjoyed it," I said consolingly.

Ambrose snorted.

And then to my amazement he stopped the car and took my hand.

"Moppet," he said. "I'm having cold shivers down my spine when I think of what happened."

"Don't give it a thought," I urged him. "You had to do it. I see that."

"That's what shakes me," said Ambrose gloomily. "It wasn't necessary. Hollow told me on the phone just before we started. Some bright spirit in the finger-print racket found Cobden's prints on the remaining capsule in Lila's bag, and Mark's prints on the gin bottle and the pill-box in the lilies. Hollow couldn't understand why Rose's prints weren't on the capsule, since she had put the capsules in the box in the bag, and she told him that Mark gave her the things in a little box and she just tipped them into the china box that Lila used. I shall have nightmares for weeks."

"Well, we won't tell my Papa that," I said firmly.

To my eternal amazement Ambrose kissed my hand very hard and solemnly.

And then a huge lorry went roaring past and a watery pink began to waver in the grey sky low over the edge of a field. For some reason I wanted to cry and at the same time felt awfully pleased and warm inside.

"Press on," said Ambrose, then let in the clutch and we drove on through the lovely morning to London.